

It might surprise you to know it, given that I'm a rabbi and that I've spent a lot of my pandemic time davening (online, on the sidewalk of 210th Street, even privately on Shabbat), but prayer has not been coming easily to me these last several months. Yes, we have a rhythm of meeting online, twice a day every weekday, with special gatherings to get us ready for Shabbat and to bid Shabbat farewell with a rousing havdalah. But I, just like you, have been exiled from my regular routine, physically separated from my prayer community. This doesn't sit well with me at all, try as we do to make the best of it.

Jewish prayer comes in three forms: praise, petition, and thanks. My guess is that of the three, it's been easiest to do the middle one these days. Petition—asking God for things, notably health and sustenance these days—that's probably our natural inclination. Help me get through this, God, help me endure the fear and uncertainty of these difficult days. We may even be inclined to express gratitude for what we have in spite of the disruptions of COVID-19. But to be honest, the first form, praise, has been harder to come by for me. In struggling to imagine God in terms of the language of traditional Jewish prayer, I'm probably not alone these days. And I'm very much in sync with other Jews throughout history who wondered, "Can I say this, if at the moment I'm not sure I believe it?"

There's a great story in the Talmud about the same kind of struggle with prayer. It's based on a phrase from this week's Torah reading, *Ekev*, that you probably recognize from the 'Amidah, our tradition's central prayer. In the Torah, Moshe refers to God as "*Ha'El HaGadol HaGibor veHaNora*—God, Who is great, mighty, and awesome" (Deuteronomy 10:17). How did that phrase migrate from the Torah to our davening? Rabbi Yehoshu'a ben Levi credits *Anshei Knesset Hagedolah*, The Men of the Great Assembly, who may have been those leaders of the Jewish community who bridge the gap between the Biblical and Rabbinic periods. But Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi credits them with something more than a technical innovation. He considers them spiritual giants who respond to crisis with faith.

"Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? Because they returned the Crown to its former glory. Moshe came and said in his prayer, 'the great, the mighty, the awesome God.' Jeremiah came and said, 'Gentiles are carousing in His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness?' So in his prayer (Jeremiah 32:18), he did not say 'awesome.' Then Daniel came and said, 'Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might?' So in his prayer (Daniel 9:4), he did not say 'mighty.'

"The Members of the Great Assembly came and said, on the contrary! This is the fullest expression of God's might, that He conquers His inclination and exercises patience toward the wicked. And it's also evidence of the Holy Blessed One's awesomeness, for were it not for that, how could our nation survive among the others?" (Bavli Yoma 69b)

Let's unpack the teaching. Moshe praises God using three terms. But two of the Bible's greatest paragons of faith, Jeremiah and Daniel, couldn't bring themselves to say all three words. That's because in their lived experience—for Jeremiah, a witness to the destruction of the Temple, and Daniel, a Jew in exile—God had not proven to be all of these things. To Jeremiah, God was not being awesome, and Daniel thought God wasn't being mighty. They didn't want their prayers to contradict their feelings about God in that moment, so they used two of the terms of praise, not all three.

And then, the Men of the Great Assembly come, and the Temple was rebuilt by then, and Jews were permitted to return from exile, and they "restored the Crown to its glory." They gave God full due,

all three praises. In composing the formula for prayer, they gave us the words we say at the beginning of every Amidah: *Ha-El HaGadol HaGibor veHaNora*.

But when Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi lived, in the first half of the 3rd century CE, yet again the Temple had been destroyed, and yet again the Jewish People were scattered in exile. With whom does he identify? With the Biblical heroes Jeremiah and Daniel, who insisted that when it comes to praising God, one can only call it as he or she sees it? Or with the Men of the Great Assembly, who made Moshe's prayer whole again? Actually, he identifies with none of them. He says that the purpose of praising God is not to identify what you see, but to express what you wish for. Praise of God in prayer is not descriptive, it's aspirational. He teaches us to pray for what we want NOT ONLY IN PETITION, BUT IN PRAISE as well.

The idea that we should praise God's essence, or the Divine Essence we wish for, instead of what we think is God's behavior, applies to person-to-person praise, too. Adam Grant, the popular professor at the Wharton School at UPenn, is the author of *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*. Grant encourages parents and educators to take a Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi-like approach to praising children for their essence, not their behavior. "[In an] experiment led by psychologist Joan Grusec, after children shared some marbles with their peers, a number of them were randomly assigned to have their *behavior* praised...others received *character* praise. Children who received character praise were subsequently more generous...When our character is praised, we internalize it as part of our identities. Instead of seeing ourselves as engaging in isolated moral acts, we start to develop a more unified self-concept as a moral person" (p. 168).

Grant suggests that we get a better response when we ask kids to "be helpers" than when we ask them to help. "Instead of 'please don't cheat,'... 'please don't be a cheater.'" "Don't drink and drive" could be rephrased as "Don't be a Drunk Driver." As Grant writes: "When we shift our emphasis from behavior to character, people evaluate their choices differently. Instead of asking whether this behavior will achieve the results they want, they take action because it is the right thing to do" (170).

Obviously, there's a difference between praising children, or any person, and praising God. I am not suggesting that we should praise God in order to manipulate God to respond the way we want as some kind of pedagogical strategy. Or maybe this is pedagogy, only the learner here is not God, the recipient of praise, but the pray-er. By describing God's essence, in all God's glory, and in all the glory of the language, we make prayer about more than the immediate moment. We make prayer about something larger, beyond us and our feelings and needs.

Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, said of prayer, "If you don't believe it, don't say it." If you don't think God is all that, don't force the language. I beg to differ. The Men of the Great Assembly gave us words so we wouldn't have to be so creative every time we pray. And those words of praise challenge us to think beyond ourselves and to aspire to a relationship with God that can survive even harsh challenges to faith. Instead of "if you don't believe it, don't say it," I suggest "Say it so you'll believe it." Or, at least, hope for it.

In the worst periods in Jewish history, when evil adversaries oppressed us, making Jewish prayer, even Jewish existence, punishable by death, we continued to praise God, even if we wondered "where is His awesomeness, where is His might?" Our current trauma, the displacement of Days of Corona, is terrible, but it, too, shall pass. And so I have said to myself, and I say to you: Don't wait until it

passes to praise God. In spite of my difficulties with praying, I've made sure I was davening. "*HaEl HaGadol HaGibor veHaNora*—even if I can't see it in action, I know, because I believe, that *Zeh Eli ve-anvehu*—This is My God, and I will glorify him. On line, in person, or on your own at home, I hope you will, too.

Shabbat Shalom!