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Blog Post: My Personal Understanding of Prayer

One might wonder – Why do we show up to pray? Why do we make the choice to drive over to the synagogue on each Shabbat and on each holiday to sing and recite the same ancient words over and over again? The thing is, if we pay attention, prayer is so much more than just a routine set of familiar words and melodies. Prayer can provide us with rare, precious moments of quiet reflection, with the opportunity to raise our voices together as one, with opportunities to aspire both in breath and in the hope for a better future.

Sometimes the prayer itself guides us into doing the thing we've just said or sung aloud. For instance, take Psalm 150. The *mapik* in the ה of הללו-יה makes us physically aspirate and, therefore, praise God with all of our נשמה, all of our soul and all of our breath. This is the brilliance of the liturgy; even when we are not yet attuned to its profundity, it guides us towards enacting that depth, attempting to grab our attention and orient us when it can.

Perhaps that is the objective of prayer, to attune us in a different way to the world around us. Prayer can help us see the beauty in everyday happenings – to notice the sun rising or setting as fellow commuters hurry past, their heads down, enslaved to their cell phones, and understand that we are in the midst of witnessing a miracle. Seymour Rossel writes, “How do we explain that, for those of us who experience our Judaism spiritually, not only did Moses once stand at the burning bush, but, in fact, every bush is burning, and all we have to do is turn aside to look?” (Judaism as a Spiritual Religion 2). Prayer helps us pay attention to the bush that is burning or the sun that is setting right in front of our eyes; it draws our attention to what is needed in the world, to the causes and the people that are calling our names.

Prayer can also help illuminate things in the text we hadn't seen before, highlighting something unexpected. Maybe we usually think about teaching our children as we chant *V'ahavta*, and then one day, a moving *iyyun t'filah* or a beautiful poem or a stray glance enables us to notice the word “*hayom*.” We suddenly realize that we have the opportunity to live the spirit of *V'ahavta* and of Torah each and every day... even if we forgot to do it yesterday, we can try again.

Prayer can inspire us, anger us, move us, energize us, or all of these in some combination at the same time. It connects us to ourselves, our souls, our spirits, to one another, and to God. Rabbi David Wolpe shares this story: “If you saw somebody pulling a boat to the shore and were mistaken about mechanics and motion, you might think that he was pulling the shore to the boat. And that's what prayer is like. You think that you're pulling God to

you, but in fact, if you pray well, you pull yourself to God” (Comins, “Making Prayer Real” 41). So while we might pray out of a desire for God to draw closer to us, prayer actually brings us closer to God. It’s like a real life example of Yehuda HaLevi’s poem, *Yah Ana Emtza’acha*: “My heart cries out to You: Please draw near to me. The moment I reach out for You, I find You reaching in for me” (English translation from *Mishkan T’filah*, p. 171). Once we reach out in prayer, we actually have pulled ourselves closer to God, and hopefully find God’s presence reaching right back.

Prayer is successful and makes a difference if we become different, if we walk out of the chapel, sanctuary, or other sacred space and are suddenly attuned in a different way. Maybe we walk out feeling more present to God’s presence in the world. Maybe prayer inspires us to go out and act upon those aspirations and hopes for the future, working to co-create them with God in order to build the world we desire. Rossel writes, “To the extent that we see ourselves as God’s partner in creation, our lives are filled with the meaning of creating a world of peace. Even our prayers take on new significance when we feel ourselves partners in whatever task we ask God to help us accomplish” (Judaism as a Spiritual Religion 12). In this vein, it would be a real shame to see our prayers solely as dusty texts that live in our *siddurim*, only coming to life when we enter the synagogue and pull them off the shelves. Prayer must, even more importantly, come alive when we leave the sanctuary, in our words and in our deeds, allowing us to demonstrate a partnership with God in which we might create together the kinder, more just world we desire.