

Pray Like Someone is Listening; Listen Like Someone is Praying

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Prayer can seem pointless.

What exactly are we informing an omniscient God of? And what for? If God knows us, knows what we have and what we lack then what are we doing when we speak to God about our suffering and articulate our wants and needs? In Parashat Lekh Lekha, God challenges Avraham, but also blesses him in innumerable ways. Through reading God's blessing closely, we can gain significant insight into what it means to be in communication with the Divine, both in asking God for what we lack and in thanking God for what we have.

The *parashah* opens with God's bold request. He asks Avraham to leave his home and all of its comfort and support in order to make his own way in a strange land. God promises Avraham that despite these challenges, or perhaps in recompense for them, God will be with him and bless him,

בראשית יב:ג

וְאֶבְרָכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אֶאָר וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְּךָ כָּל מְשֻׁפָּחֵת הָאֲדָמָה

Bereishit 12:3

I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse. And all of the families of the earth will be blessed through you.

R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz,¹ the *Keli Yakar*, notices something subtle about the construction of this verse. He asks why the phrasing in the verse is not perfectly parallel.² He suggests that the verse should read, “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you,” but instead it says, “I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse.” In blessing, God’s reaction is listed first—God will bless those who bless; but in cursing, God’s reaction is listed second—those who curse, God will curse.

The *Keli Yakar* explains that this verse’s phrasing indicates a credit to those who would extend their blessing. “Those who bless you” get blessed by God *even before* the blessing departs from their lips. The verse says *avarekha*, “I [that is, God] will bless,” before it says *mevarakh’kha*, “those who bless you” because even before they actually bless Avraham, God already sends them His favor.

This explanation relies on a particular assumption about God’s knowledge. In order for God to act preemptively in this way, God must know that you intend to bless before you actually do so. According to the *Keli Yakar*’s understanding of this verse, God has the capacity to read human thoughts. This provokes the *Keli Yakar* to ask the essential question. If it is the case that God knows you completely, knows what you need and knows what you want, then why do we need to open our mouths and pray? What use is the utterance of our lips? Why does the person who would bless Avraham even need to pronounce their blessing at all?

The *Keli Yakar* answers this question with an invaluable perspective on what it means to pray and what it takes to bless:

¹ 16th century, Prague.

² The verse, while not parallel, does form a chiasm [A-B-B-A], another very prevalent biblical structure, which can organize the phrases of a verse, verses within a unit, and organize a number of larger units. See Bereishit 1:27 and 9:6 for examples of other chiastic verses.

על זה אומר ומה' מענה לשון (משלי טז, א) כי זה מתת ה' הוא שנתן מענה לשון לאדם, כמרז"ל (יבמות סד.) שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים, לפי שנמשלים אצל השי"ת כילד שעשועים אצל אביו. אם הוא מבקש דבר מאביו אע"פ שאביו יודע מה שהבן צריך מ"מ רוצה האב שיוציא הבן מפיו מבוקשו לפי שהאב משתעשע בדבור שפתיו של הבן. כך אומר הקב"ה לישראל השמיעני את קולך כי קולך ערב לגשת לי. ואין הש"י רוצה להתנהג עמנו כדרך השרים שאין מניחין לדבר בפניהם הרבה ומיד כאשר יבינו כוונת השואל אומרים לו קצר דבריך או כלה מדברותיך וצא, אבל הקב"ה בחסדו אינו כן כמ"ש (תהלים כא, ג) תאות לבו נתת לו ואעפ"כ וארשת שפתיו בל מנעת סלה. לפי שאנו בעיניו ית' כשעשוע ילד ובן יקיר.³

Regarding this, the verse says that “**articulate speech comes from God**” (Mishlei 16:1) for it is a gift from God that He gives speech to humanity. As our Rabbis say (in Yevamot 64a) that God desires the prayers of the righteous because they (the righteous) are to God like a delightful son to his father. If the son asks for something from his father, even though his father already knows what he needs, the father still wants the son to verbally articulate his request because the father delights in the speech of his child’s lips.

So the Holy Blessed One says to Israel, “Let Me hear your voice because your voice is pleasing to approach Me” (cf. Shir HaShirim 2:14).

And God doesn’t want to act with us the way that government officials do. They don’t allow people to speak before them at length, and once they understand the intention of the asker they immediately tell him, “Curtail your words!” or “Stop your talking and leave!” But the Holy Blessed One in His kindness is not like this, as it says, “**the desire of his heart you have given him** and even so, **the articulation of his lips you have not ever prevented**” (Tehilim 21:3). Because we are in the eyes of God like a delightful child and dear son.

³ R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz names his commentary *Keli Yakar* because of his name, Ephraim, and in reference to the verse, **הבן יקיר לי אפרים** **אם ילד שעשעים**, “Ephraim is my dear son, even a delightful child” (Yirmiyah 31:19). His choice to refer to the son as dear, *yakir*, and a delightful child, *yeled sha’ashuim* is not coincidental. In fact, throughout his commentary, when he is particularly pleased with or attached to an insight of his, he will call it a dear or precious interpretation, a *perush yakar*.

If we think that prayer is about telling God what our needs are in the hopes that God will fulfill our request, then we are gravely mistaken, says the *Keli Yakar*. God doesn't need any information from us about our lives. God is God, and God knows. Our prayer is not going to determine if our wishes are to be granted. God is God, and God decides.

Petitioning God in prayer is not about conveying information in order to get a result, to get what we asked for. God does not grant requests; God grants an audience. Prayer is about being in conversation, about being given the opportunity to air our grievances, articulate our pain, wallow in our suffering, and to never ever be told, "You've spoken enough" or, "Here's what you should do" or worse, "Here's what I would do." God listens to us like a parent who just wants to be there for us, who just loves to hear our voice.

This image of prayer is so powerful in that it provides a loving justification for why God doesn't appear to "answer" our prayers; God doesn't respond because God is listening. You might feel frustrated that you don't hear anything, but the alternative could be worse. The alternative could be that you would come to God with your burdens and your struggles and your tears and just as you start to speak, God would respond with, "Tell me something I don't know," or, "Are you quite done yet?!" And you would leave devastated.

In this articulation, prayer is almost a kind of talk therapy. We don't pray in order to relay information to some entity who will solve our problems. Instead, prayer affords you with an opportunity to share yourself and talk about your life without ever being censored or silenced. Prayer is not about God's reaction; it is about your experience. It's about being given the space or making the space to process what is hard and, hopefully, to feel heard.

Prayer, however, is not exclusively about asking for what feels missing; it is also about thanking God for what we do have and acknowledging God through praise and blessing. It is fitting, then, that the *Keli Yakar* offers a second explanation of the phrase "I will bless

those who bless you” which is about our receiving and granting blessing. Specifically, the blessing that God bestows through the words recited by the priests, *Birkat Kohanim*.

טעם אחר לדבר, לפי שאינו דומה מוריק מכלי מלא וגדוש למוריק מכלי חסר כדרך שמצינו בברכת כהנים (במדבר ו, כג) **כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמור להם**. שהשליח ציבור אומר תחלה אל הכהן **יברכך ה'** כי הש"ץ הוא סרסור בין הקב"ה ובין הכהנים והוא אומר תחלה אל הכהן **יברכך ה'** ומוריד עליו השפע דרך הצנורות כדי שיהיה הכהן כלי מלא ברכת ה' ואח"כ יוריק הכהן מן כלי מלא על ישראל כי אז חלה הברכה ביותר כשהמשפיע נמצא בו הברכה בעצם וראשונה, כי איך יברך מי שאינו מבורך בעצמו. על כן נאמר **ואברכה מברכך** שקודם שיברכך אני אברכה תחלה כדי שיהיה כלי מלא ברכת ה' ויוריק עליך מן כלי מלא וגדוש.

Another reason for this is that there is no comparison between one who pours from a full and saturated vessel and one who pours from an empty vessel. As we have found in the blessing of the priests, **“So you should bless Benei Yisrael, Say to them”**⁴ (BeMidbar 6:23)—that the prayer leader first prompts the priest with **“May God bless you...”** For the prayer leader is the intermediary between the Holy Blessed One and the priests. And he first says to the priest, “May God bless you” and brings upon him the divine bounty through the channels so that the priest will be full of God’s blessing, and afterward the priest will pour from a full vessel onto Israel. Then the blessing will have a greater effect when the bestower first has the blessing in him. For how can one bless who is not themselves blessed? That is why it says, **“I will bless those who bless you”**—that before he blesses you I [i.e. God] will bless him first so that he will be full of God’s blessing and pour upon you from a vessel that is full and saturated.

According to the *Keli Yakar*, a person needs to feel that they themselves are blessed in order to offer blessing to someone else. Blessing is a medium that relies on a feeling of fullness and of plenty. The reason why the *kohanim* are prompted with the words of the blessing by the prayer leader is so that they first receive the blessing that they are called on to bestow.

⁴ This extra phrase, “say to them,” is the source for the notion that the leader prompts to priests. On this reading, the person who is commanded is the one leading the prayers and the “them” is to the priests.

When the *hazzan* says, *yevarekb'kha*, “May God bless you,” they are actually engaging in an act of blessing the *kohanim*. When the *kohanim* then say, “May God bless you” there is an implied, “as you and God have blessed me.”

Prayer is not complete without this positive element. When we pray, we cannot plead for our lives without also praising God for being alive. Prayer calls on us to acknowledge both our emptiness and our fullness. But this can be unbearably difficult. How can we bestow blessing when we feel empty? How do we thank God while we still feel bereft of what we truly need?

The answer seems to be that we need to get support from one another. The *kohen* knows that he is blessed by God not because he hears a heavenly voice thundering or whispering through the pews. He knows it and feels it because he hears the congregation's representative say to him, “May you be blessed.” The source of the people's blessing is the priests and the source of the priestly blessing is the people. So too in our own quest for blessing we need to step out of ourselves and into the loving community. When we make each other feel supported and validated we can bless and be blessed.

The *Keli Yakar's* first interpretation of prayer contains a similar difficulty. Just as it can be challenging for me to feel blessed when faced with my own needs, it can be almost impossible for me to feel heard by God when what I'm confronted with is God's total silence. What makes it possible for me to imagine, to sense that when I'm talking God is listening? That when I am complaining, God is sympathetic? This assurance is only possible for me to conjure if I feel heard by other people. If I know that sometimes silence is attention and not neglect, then it is not hard for me to tap into and be comforted by the explanation that God is not ignoring me, rather God is giving me space.

The feeling of being blessed by God comes from hearing the blessing of other people, their presence is a proxy for God's presence. So too my experience of being listened to by God

only works if it comes with and is like an experience that I have had of having been listened to like a delightful child, of having been heard by someone who is silently paying attention to me with patience, love, and curiosity.

This is why when Avraham is feeling most alone, most isolated from the people who have moored him, God blesses him with the most simple and fundamental of blessings. God blesses him with other people.

בראשית יב:ב-ג

²וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְךָ, לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, וְאֶבְרַכְךָ, וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי; וְהָיָה, בְּרַכָּה. ³וְאֶבְרַכְךָ, מִבְּרַכְיָה, וּמִקְלָלָה, אָאֵר;
וְנִבְרַכְּךָ, כָּךְ, כָּל מִשְׁפָּחַת הָאֲדָמָה

Bereishit 12:2-3

²And I will make you into a great nation. And I will bless you and magnify your name and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse. And all of the families of the earth will be blessed through you.

We feel God's presence when it is bestowed on us by other people. The key to my being successful in prayer is you. When Avraham felt the most alone, God said to him, "Trust me: There will be people there to bless you and whom you will want to bless." Let's make God's promise true and God's presence real by bestowing presence and support, blessing and fullness on one another.

Wishing you a *Shabbat Shalom u-Mevorakh*—a Shabbat full of peace and full of blessing.