



Min ha-Meitzar

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Recently, a dear friend and I sat down to study some talmudic passages about *tefillah* in an effort to explore the role of our spiritual practice in times like the one we are confronting now. We learned about the source of our three daily *tefillot* (Shaharit, Minhah, and Arvit) and found one idea that served as a guiding light for how to think about prayer in our current moment:

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ד:א, דף ז טור א

מאיכן למדו ג' תפילות. רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר כנגד ג' פעמים שהיום משתנה על הבריות.

Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:1, 7a

From where do we learn the three daily prayers? R. Shmuel bar Nahman says:

Corresponding to the three times that the day changes upon living things.

Unlike other approaches in the Talmud—which root *tefillah* in the fixed nature of the daily perpetual offerings or the spontaneous expressions of our ancestors—this approach connects *tefillah* to the very real sense of the change and uncertainty that are part of the fabric of our days. The current situation has only heightened this sense as we feel a hundred different feelings everyday. R. Shmuel bar Nahman's approach to *tefillah* has something particularly



valuable to offer us now. Thankfully, he offers more than a frame for thinking about *tefillah* and provides some words with which to express its sentiment. He continues:

בְּשַׁחַר צִרִיךְ אָדָם לומר מוֹדָה אֲנִי לַפְּנֵיךְ ה' אֱלֹדִי וְאֱלֹדֵי אֲבוֹתַי שֶׁהוֹצֵאתָנִי מֵאֲפֵלָה לְאוֹרָה. בְּמִנְחָה צִרִיךְ אָדָם לומר מוֹדָה אֲנִי לַפְּנֵיךְ ה' אֱלֹדִי וְאֱלֹדֵי אֲבוֹתַי כְּשֶׁשָּׁמַעְתָּנִי לְרִאוֹת הַחֶמֶה בְּמִזְרַח כִּי זָכִיתִי לְרִאוֹת בְּמַעְרֵב. בְּעֶרֶב צִרִיךְ לומר יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹדִי וְאֱלֹדֵי אֲבוֹתַי כְּשֶׁשָּׁמַעְתָּנִי מֵאֲפֵלָה וְהוֹצֵאתָנִי לְאוֹרָה כִּי תוֹצִיאֵנִי מֵאֲפֵלָה לְאוֹרָה.

In the morning one should say, “I give thanks to You, HaShem, my God and God of my ancestors, that You brought me out of darkness into light.” In the afternoon, one should say, “I give thanks to You, HaShem, my God and God of my ancestors, that just as You gave me merit to see the sun in the east, I have also merited to see it in the west.” And in the evening one should say, “May it be Your will, HaShem, my God and God of my ancestors, that just as I was in darkness and You brought me out into light, so will You bring me from dark to light.”

This teaching highlights the emotional journey of every day, moving from dark to light and back to dark. But what piqued the interest of me and my *havruta* was R. Shmuel bar Nahman’s description of Minḥah. According to R. Shmuel bar Nahman, the Minḥah recitation begins with thanking God for the merit God has given, and then turns to articulate the merit that we create as we move through the day. This gives us a format in which we can take time in our *tefillah* to consider the merits we have been given, the present blessings that are manifest in our lives. By itself, that can provide us with a sense of being supported. Then, we can consider what that merit allows us to accomplish through our own actions.

This reminds me of the field of positive psychology and its approach to resilience, which places a lot of emphasis on taking stock of one’s personal resources, especially when confronted with trying and tragic circumstances. Such taking stock doesn’t ask us to ignore

the difficulties we face, but to not lose touch with what we have within us to confront them. In essence, R. Shmuel bar Nahman's *tefillah* formulation can be a recipe to put our personal resources into focus and then a further encouragement to take hold of them and use them.

My *havruta* also noticed that, in the morning and evening, the light is described as though it were uniform, but in the Minḥah formulation, we learn that this is simplistic. There is not just “light” or “day” but the different character of “the sun in the east” and the “sun in the west.” He then connected this to the sensitivity of gardeners, who know which plants require morning light, versus which ones thrive in the afternoon sun. In this way, prayer is a practice that connects you to the present moment, accepting that it contains things unique to itself. From this vantage point, the Minḥah prayer's shift of receiving merit to creating it is a reflection of the fact that prayer may help us slow down and really see where we are right now, even to noticing the quality and detail of light in that hour. By extension, perhaps Minḥah can give us insight about what the right action is for us in that moment—the right flower to plant for the right light, as it were.

By the end of our learning together, it felt as though my dear friend, myself, and R. Shmuel bar Nahman had been part of a real conversation, each of us coming away with new understandings and new questions to explore next time. It felt as though we had all seen something and been seen by someone. Certainly, this encounter gave rise to some realizations about *tefillah* in these times. But more than that, engaging in this way felt a bit like a *tefillah* unto itself. Perhaps it was.

