

The Power of Prayer When We're Not Feeling It

A Conversation Between Yehuda Amichai And Massekhet Berakhot

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What makes prayer feel “real”? What facilitates a sense that something is happening when we pray? For many of us, after months of praying alone, we may be having a hard time feeling moved in prayer. We may now sense quite starkly the importance of other people’s presence in shaping our own prayer experiences.

Even though prayer may fundamentally be a conversation between us and God it can be profoundly interpersonal. The tone and attitude we have towards others in prayer—the way we carry ourselves in a synagogue—these interpersonal components help instill in us a sense of gravity, a sense of the Divine. The Talmud speaks strongly about what happens when we fail each other on this front:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות דף ה:

תניא: אבא בנימין אומר: שנים שנכנסו להתפלל, וקדם אחד מהם להתפלל ולא המתין את חברו ויצא

- טורפין לו תפלתו בפניו. שנא - מר: "טרף נפשו באפו הלמענך תעזב ארץ" (איוב יח:ד).

ולא עוד אלא שגורם לשכינה שתסתלק מישראל, שנאמר: "ויעתק צור ממקמו" (שם); ואין צור אלא הקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר "צור ילדך תשי" (דברים לב:יה).

Talmud Bavli Brachot 5b

It was taught: Abba Binyamin says: If two people entered to pray, and one of them finished praying first and didn't wait for their fellow and left, their prayer is torn up in their face as it says: “You who tear yourself to pieces in anger—Will the land be abandoned for your sake?” (Job 18:4).

And no more, but they cause God’s indwelling presence to leave Israel, as it says, “Will rocks be dislodged from their place?” (Ibid.); And there is no rock except the Holy

Blessed One, as it says: “You neglected the Rock that begot you, forgot the God who brought you forth” (Deut. 32:18).

This passage discusses what may seem like a fairly trivial, if somewhat impolite, behavior. A person finishes praying quickly and leaves a place of prayer to get on with their day, abandoning their fellow worshiper. The Talmud delivers a harsh verdict: This person’s prayer is torn apart.

At first glance, this sounds like a punishment. The Talmud interprets a verse in Job to mean essentially, ‘You think God leaves when you do?’ It takes a jab at the arrogance of one who can easily walk away from a site where someone else prays, as if God leaves too. Their prayer is torn up to shake them out of their arrogance.

Yet, it can also be read as a statement

of fact, as a natural consequence of their action. If someone walks out on another person in prayer—and in a sense walks out on God—this makes their own prayer inevitably dissolve; if they had realized that God was present, they would never have walked out! Walking out on another person in prayer proves that they didn't think God was present for their prayer either; deep down they don't think prayer is real. To walk out on a friend in prayer is to show that prayer means nothing. It makes God, and prayer, disappear in an instant.

The Talmud offers a harsh pronouncement on us when we fail to make prayer real for each other. But this discussion also reflects the inverse—our powerful ability to make prayer palpable. The passage in the Talmud continues:

ואם המתין לו מה שכרו?

אמר רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא: זוכה לברכות הללו, שנאמר: "לוא הקשבת למצותי ויהי כנהר שלומך וצדקתך כגלי הים ויהי כחול זרעך וצאצאי מעיך וגו'" (ישעיהו מח:יה-יט).

And if he waits for him what is his reward?

Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina said: He merits the following blessings, as it is stated: "If only you had listened to My *mitzvot* then

your peace would be as a river, and your righteousness as the waves of the sea. Your seed would be as the sand, and the offspring of your body [like the grains thereof; his name would be neither cut off nor destroyed from before Me]" (Isaiah 48:18 - 19).

Standing alongside a friend, we perform an act of witnessing.

The Talmud promises abundant, rich reward when we support each other in prayer. By waiting for someone else who is still praying, we perform an act of witnessing. We cultivate a palpable sense of God's presence and this unfolds in generative and nourishing blessing.

We see here that much of what makes prayer real is peer reinforcement. If we act like nothing is happening when someone else prays, then our own prayer becomes

nothing. If we approach another person's prayer with an awareness of God's presence, we can enable that presence to be a reality. We make, or break, each other's experiences of prayer.

How does this dynamic work when we are truly praying alone, as many may be during the high holidays this year? How can we have a sense that prayer is real and moving and create space for God's indwelling presence, if that reality isn't mirrored back to us by the behavior of others whose actions implicitly communicate that God is there and prayer is real? How can we find prayer moving, if left solely to our own devices?

Yehuda Amichai offers a modern response to the problem of feeling unmoved when praying alone. In a poem in his collection *Open, Closed, Open* he writes:

גם לתפילת יחיד צריכים שניים:
תמיד אחד שמתנועע
והשני שלא נע הוא האלהים.
אבל כשאבי התפלל הוא עמד
במקומו
זקוף ובלי נוע והכריח את האלהים
לנוע
כמו סוף ולהתפלל אל אבי.

Also for individual prayer two are necessary:

There is always one who moves
And the Other who does not
move is God.

But when my father prayed he
stood in place

Straight, motionless, and
forced God to move
Like a reed, and to pray to my
father.

Every prayer needs a partner, a witness, much like the view that emerged from the Talmud above. But when we find ourselves alone, when no other person is standing nearby, waiting for us to finish our prayer, the second figure may be Godself. In Amichai's rendering, God is the witness, the one who doesn't move, but simply is present. In ordinary prayer, God waits, motionless, for us to finish; God affirms the substantive act of prayer.

Through this image Amichai, on the one hand, confidently expresses that we are never alone in prayer; even when we pray individually, we are assured of, and moved by, God's presence. On the other hand, God's constant presence may be hard to access. Amichai complicates a naive or simple theological view of God's presence in prayer by describing his defiant father, who stood erect and unmoved in the act of prayer, forcing God to break the stillness.

In these brief lines, Amichai moves from the confident Maimonidean

picture of God as the Unmoved Mover, towards whom we contort ourselves in prayer, to a more skeptical stance that dares God to make the first move.

God is the witness, the one who doesn't move.

In truth, where we stand—in a post-Holocaust world, in a world of widespread illness and devastation, and rampant injustice—we may not feel moved to pray by an immediate sense of God's presence. But that doesn't eliminate the need for prayer.

Let us read Amichai's poem through the Talmudic scene we opened with: The father does not walk out

on another's prayer, not even his own. Yet, he doesn't pray either. He stands, waiting. Through his own lingering and steady presence, he makes space for a prayer that originates beyond himself. If we are insistent enough—if we show up, even when alone, even when uninspired—it will pave the way for nothing less than divine prayer.

As we head into what is likely to be a disorienting season of *Yamim Noraim*, unmoored and disconnected from the usual rhythms and community who help make our prayers real, it is worth being open, ready, and determined to land on a different sort of prayer, the prayer that moves God. If and when we stand alone on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and find that we are not moved to pray, we can hold the space for God to react to this moment, for God to bend and contort in the form of a prayer we do not yet know and our world desperately needs. ♦