



On Prayer and the Possible

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Parashat Va'Ethan 5782

In Parashat Va'Ethan, Moshe beseeches God. He doesn't get his request. Interestingly, the sages peg this moment of prayer as the entryway to explore the meanings of prayer more widely, jumping off from the word *va'ethan* to list ten kinds of prayer connected to different verbs and different figures in the Torah.¹ Taking Moshe's unanswered prayer as the lens, we are invited into an exploration of what prayer is, entirely detached from the question of whether prayer is answered.

Many don't believe God answers our prayers in any direct way. On Tisha b'Av, when we just read the book of Lamentations, we said of God, "You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, That no prayer may pass through" (Lamentations 3:44). Perhaps God only blocked prayer for a passing moment in the destruction of Jerusalem, but articulating this sentiment once a year gives voice to a gnawing anxiety that may be more pervasive. What if our prayers go nowhere? It can feel pointless to pray when we have no sense that God is there on the other end, listening and responding.

¹ Sifrei Devarim Va'Ethan #26



In our own tour of prayer over the cycle of *parshiyot*, however, we have encountered robust models for prayer that embrace—rather than evade—a raw and honest accounting of doubts and uncertainties.

Prayer comes primarily from doubt, not faith. The first biblical figure we found uttering a prayer, through the lens of *midrash*, was Sarai in Pharaoh's palace. Her prayer names her position in contrast to Avraham, whose faith stems from the clarity of a divine promise ringing in his ears. Sarai boldly speaks up to God even though God has never spoken to her or made her any promises. For all she knows, God has no interest in a relationship with her at all. Sarai's doubts make her position more similar than Avraham's to our own. Despite our awareness of an inherited covenant, God has never spoken to us directly, nor does any of us carry around a specific divine promise formulated in second person singular. When we pray, we leap into a relationship with God with hope but no clarity on how God receives us and what lies ahead.

Prayer can emerge from dreams disappointed, not dreams realized, or even dreams hoped for. *Midrash* associates Avraham with the prayer for Shaḥarit, and latches onto the moment when he wakes up early in the morning and looks upon the smoke of Sodom on the horizon, clear evidence that his dream to save Sodom has failed. Nonetheless, in that very state of disappointment he prayed. Waking up to failure becomes synonymous with prayer.

Prayer can come from inheriting “someone else’s” God, not from an organic and *sui generis* individual relationship with God. The first person in the Bible to utter a formulation that looks anything like our fixed liturgy is the servant of Avraham, when he prays at the well to find a wife for Yitzḥak.² He invokes God as “the God of my master Avraham,” (Gen 24:12)

² See my *d'var Torah* on Parashat Ḥayyei Sarah at <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/embracing-overlooked-“patriarch”>.



akin to our formulation in the amidah as we name the God of our ancestors, “the God of Avraham.” Similarly, Moshe, who comes to know God at the burning bush as the God of Avraham, Yitzhak and Ya’akov, may feel quite distant and alienated from this God with whom he has had no direct relationship.³ To the extent it feels foreign to pray, that may be a feature rather than a bug. Stepping into this indirect inheritance requires an act of initiative like Avraham’s servant’s and like Moshe’s choice to engage. Through our initiative, we can end up finding our own place in relationship with this God we don’t really know, and come to articulate our own voice.

Prayer reflects courage to dream even as change seems impossible. This we learn from Moshe, who pleads to enter the land even as he knows this is against God’s will. The root of the word “*va’ethanan*” *h-n-n*, also resonates with the name of Hannah, in the book of Samuel, often construed as the foremother of prayer. Hannah prays for a child when reality has declared that dream impossible. Her prayer reflects courage even in the face of taunting and mockery.⁴ The Talmud brings an analogy to understand Hannah’s prayer, perhaps also a paradigm to understand our own prayer each day:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות לא:

אמרה חנה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם, מכל צבאי צבאות שבראת בעולמך קשה בעיניך שתתן לי בן אחד?
משל למה הדבר דומה – למלך בשר ודם שעשה סעודה לעבדיו, בא עני אחד ועמד על הפתח, אמר להם: תנו לי פרוסה אחת! ולא השגיחו עליו; דחק ונכנס אצל המלך. אמר לו: אדוני המלך, מכל סעודה שעשית קשה בעיניך ליתן לי פרוסה אחת?

³ R. Elie Kaunfer on first blessing of the *amidah*.

⁴ **Shmuel I 1:6**

וְכַעֲסָתָהּ צָרָתָהּ גַּם-לֵעֵס בְּעֶבֶר הִרְעַמָּה כִּי-סָגַר יְקֹוֹק בְּעַד רַחֲמָהּ:

Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the Lord had closed her womb.



Talmud Bavli Berakhot 31b

Hannah said before the Holy Blessed One, “Master of the Universe, of all the multitudes of multitudes that You created in your world is it so difficult in your eyes to give me one child?

A parable: to what is this similar? To a king of flesh and blood who made a feast for his servants. One poor person came and stood at the doorway. He said to them: Give me one slice of bread! They didn’t pay attention to him. He pushed through and came to the king. He said to him: My master, the king, of the whole feast that you made, is it so hard in your eyes to give me one slice of bread?

Prayer in this parable is about “pushing through” to the king. It is not at all clear whether the king wants an audience with this person (most likely not), or listens to the request. It is certainly not clear whether the king responds affirmatively. We happen to know from the continuation of the story that Hannah’s prayer will be “answered” with the birth of her child. But that’s immaterial to what she teaches us about prayer.

What is most well known as a lesson from Hannah is that prayers should be “silent,”⁵ but this parable teaches so much more. Prayer is about pushing through past adversity - when reality has proved your dreams can’t happen; when everyone is ignoring or mocking the dreams you articulate. Prayer is about speaking up when you don’t even know if God wants to listen.

Every single day, when we take three steps forward to frame our act of prayer at the start of the *Amidah*, it is an act of courage—like that of the servant in the parable, pushing across the threshold—to insist on imagining that things can be different.⁶ We dream that the world could be a place of justice, that there could be peace, that there could be abundance. It can sound trite—we may hear someone else’s voice laughing at our naivete, or our own voice of cynicism

⁵ **Berakhot 31a**

”וקולה לא ישמע” — מכאן שאסור להגביה קולו בתפלתו.

From here: “And her voice could not be heard,” we derive the *halakhah* that one is forbidden to raise their voice in their *Amidah* prayer.

⁶ See my discussion of three steps forward in my *d’var Torah* on Parashat VaYigash.



—but that is the point. The point of prayer is to speak sincerely when it would be much easier to sink into cynicism; to pry the door open even when it is shut in our face a thousand times a day.

Prayer involves pushing open a door and being undeterred by obstacles. But it is not always easy to get past the blocks. The contemporary Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai explores prayer in his volume of poetry “Open, Closed, Open” where he surfaces potential obstacles and creatively plays with new terms of engagement. In one poem, he writes:

Even solitary prayer takes two: one to sway back and forth and the one who doesn't move is God. But when my father prayed, he would stand in his place erect, motionless, and force God to sway like a reed and pray to him.⁷	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.
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Our doubts about whether God listens to, or responds to, our prayer might leave us with a sense that prayer is an exercise in loneliness. Amichai reminds us that prayer is always relational, even when we pray alone. God may be static and silent, but this creates the context for us to be “moved” in our prayer. The image of the reed swaying plays off of the picture of someone shuckling (swaying in prayer), but the resonance goes much deeper. Prayer becomes synonymous with feeling “moved.” This notion of prayer as movement maps onto Hannah leaping across the threshold to speak to God. Prayer becomes an exercise in spiritual movement.

⁷ From “Gods Change, Prayers are Here to Stay,” in Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open*, translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (Harcourt: New York, 2000, p.42)



Sometimes we do not want to, or are unable to, be the “mover” in prayer. Then we might stand in place, cognizant of all of the ways in which we feel closed off, to God and to prayer. This too can be an opening stance for prayer, teaches Amichai. He describes his father standing still, not to shut down the relationship with God but to open it to a dynamic in which God becomes “moved” in prayer towards us. In a playful and irreverent way, Amichai here offers language for an ongoing embrace of prayer that simultaneously allows us to “give up” on the traditional posture. Sometimes we are able to leap courageously into a seeming abyss, and propel ourselves into relationship with God through prayer, and sometimes we can’t move forward. This prayer that waits for God to take the first step forward is also an honest form of prayer.

When we encounter Moshe the master of prayer getting nowhere as he beseeches God this final time, we might have thought it would be better to learn about prayer from one of his many more “successful” attempts. But *midrash* draws our attention to this unanswered prayer as the example to probe prayer more deeply. If we want to learn about prayer in our own lives, our sages invite us to linger on what doesn’t work. Surveying our ancestors, we find many would-be obstacles to prayer. Sarai in Pharaoh’s palace surfaces a fear about having no direct assurance that God wants to be in relationship with us. Avraham seeing Sodom’s rising smoke on the horizon represents despondency about the state of the world we wake up to. Hannah’s experience brings into focus an anxiety about whether our dreams are worth articulating, because these dreams have been ignored and mocked. These doubts could shut doors to prayer. Instead, however, we find that prayer holds all of this. Within these potential moments of shutting down, our ancestors birthed prayer time and time again. When we take three steps forward each day, aware of the dead ends but insisting on showing up—whether to move and push or to stand still—this is the very work of prayer.

