

We Are Never Alone

Joining the Imagined Community through Prayer

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PRAYER

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I knew how to pray before I ever learned how. When I was little, tucked in bed at night, I would say a series of prayers, each dedicated to a different group of people. I'd start with myself and the people closest to me and move out in concentric circles of concern: Family, friends, the community, the world. I prayed alone, with a childlike innocence that I often wish I could recreate as an adult. My nightly prayers conjured a web of people for whom I cared and, I hoped, cared for me—an invisible chorus joining my bedtime songs.

But did God hear my bedtime prayers?

Many texts encourage us to pray in community and suggest that this is the best (or only) way to ensure that God is listening. We learn in Massekhet Berakhot, in the name of Abba Binyamin, that a person's prayers are only heard in the synagogue.¹ This idea is then codified in a number of halakhic sources; a person has an obligation to go out

of one's way to daven with a *minyan* rather than daven alone.

In the Mishneh Torah, the Rambam teaches clearly and in no uncertain terms that God always hears the prayers of the community.

משנה תורה, הלכות תפילה ח:א
תפלת הצבור נשמעת תמיד ואפלו
היו בהן חוטאים, אין הקדוש ברוך
הוא מוצאם בתפלתן של רבים.
לפיכך צריך אדם לשמח עצמו עם
הצבור. ולא יתפלל ביהודי כל זמן
שאינו יכול להתפלל עם הצבור. ולעזר
לם ישפים אדם ויעריב לבית הכנסת
שאינו תפלתו נשמעת בכל עת
אלא בבית הכנסת. וכל מי שיש לו
בית הכנסת בעירו ואינו מתפלל בו
עם הצבור נקרא שקר רע.

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 8:1

Congregational prayer is always heard [by the Almighty]. Even if there are sinners among them, the Holy One does not reject the prayer of a multitude. Hence, a person should associate

oneself with the congregation, and never recite prayers in private when able to pray with the congregation. One should always attend synagogue, morning and evening; for only if recited in a synagogue, are one's prayers heard at all times. Whoever has a synagogue in his town and does not worship there is called a bad neighbor.

Massekhet Berakhot echoes loudly in the Rambam's exhortation that a person is obligated to join with the community, whenever possible. If you want to ensure that your prayers are heard, *tefillah b'tzibur*, communal prayer, is the key. But, what happens when there is no community with which to daven? What happens if it is impossible to gather and you find yourself utterly alone, speaking words out loud that seem to fall flat in a silent room? If one's prayer is more powerful *b'tzibur*, what power does a mere *tefillat yahid*, individual prayer, hold for us?

Perhaps surprisingly, given our

¹ Berakhot 6a.

rabbis' strong position on *tefillah b'tzibur*, our key models of prayer come from individuals turning to God and praying alone. The three daily prayer services, *Shaharit*, *Minha*, and *Ma'ariv* are each tied respectively to the solitary acts of prayer of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.² In moments of longing, moments of pain, moments of sorrow, they turned to God and cried out, opening their hearts and hoping for a response. Similarly, in *Massekhet Berakhot*, the rabbis look to Hannah to teach us many *halakhot* concerning the ideal way to pray.³ Hannah, the one who prays alone, the one who cries out unabashedly before God, is the model for what prayer can and should be.

How can it be that so many sources teach us, time and time again, that the prayers of the *tzibur* are heard more powerfully than the prayers of the individual, and at the same time, our greatest models of prayer come from *yehidim*, individuals, calling out to God?

Massekhet Berakhot offers us a possible solution to this contradiction: Even when we journey alone, we are never quite alone. The Gemara on *Berakhot* 29b debates the correct formulation for *Tefillat Ha-Derekh*, the prayer said when setting out on a journey:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות כט:–ל.
מאי תפלת הדרך? "יהי רצון מלך
פניך ה' אלהי, שתוליכני לשלום,
ותציעני לשלום, ותסמכני לשלום,
ותצילני מכל אויב ואורב בדרך,
ותשלח ברכה במעשי ידי, ותתנני
לחן לחסד ולרחמים בעיניך ובעיני
כל רואי, ברוך אתה ה' שומע
תפלה."

אמר אביי: לעולם לישתף אינן
נפשיה בהדי צבורא. היכי ניקא?
— "יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהינו
שתוליקנו לשלום וכו'."

Talmud Bavli Berakhot

29b-30a

What is the formula for the traveler's prayer? "May it be Your will, Lord my God, to lead me to peace, direct my steps to peace, and guide me to peace, and rescue me from the hands of any enemy or ambush along the way, and send blessing to the work of my hands, and let me find grace, kindness, and compassion in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see me. Blessed are You, Lord, Who hears prayer."

Abaye said: At all times a person should associate himself with the congregation and should not pray for himself alone. How should he say it? "May it be Your will, Lord our God, that You lead us to peace, etc."

The Gemara initially offers a formula for the blessing using the first person singular: May God lead *me*, may God guide *me*, may God protect *me*. This makes sense. If I am on a journey by myself, it is logical that my blessing would be in first person singular. And yet Abaye offers a correction: A person should always join themselves with the community. In this case while the traveler cannot physically join with a *minyan*, she can choose language that connects her with the larger community. According to Abaye, even if one sets out on a journey by oneself, one should daven as if they are in community, using the first person plural: May God lead *us*, may God guide *us*, may God protect *us*.

This is a radical correction. Despite the fact that we are clearly alone, we invoke the distant community in our prayer, asserting that our individual needs are in fact communal needs. By davening in the plural, Rashi says, the prayers of the individual are heard. When we can't physically daven with the community, we join ourselves to the community through our language. Even when we are alone, we are not actually alone. A *tefillat yahid* becomes *tefillat rabim*.

There is another way the prayer of an individual can become the prayer of the many. The book *Sefer Hasidim* asks, why are some people's prayers left unanswered?⁴ It responds that

² Berakhot 26b.

³ Berakhot 31a.

⁴ *Sefer Hasidim*, 553. *Sefer Hasidim* is a work with multiple authors that documents the practices of German *Hasidism* in the 12th and 13th

one who doesn't carry the pain and sorrow of his friend in his heart will find his prayers unanswered.⁵ Rather, we should daven as if our fellow's pain is our own. This is what is meant by, "You should love your fellow as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). To love our fellow as ourselves means that when we daven, even as individuals, we should daven with others in our thoughts, carrying the full understanding of their sorrow and pain "on our hearts." It is for this reason, Sefer *Hasidim* notes, that all prayers are written in plural. As we daven in our personal Amidah, "Heal *us*." "See *our* suffering."

The Amidah is the quintessential prayer where we stand to daven alone, even when we are davening with a *minyan* in a synagogue. And yet, even in our personal Amidah we are not alone. Both through the language of the liturgy and the intentions of our hearts, we are meant to bring the community into our prayer. We daven for the needs of the *rabim* as if they were our own. In this way, our individual prayer is transformed and elevated from *tefillat yahid* to *tefillat rabim*.

Our rabbis teach that our prayers are best heard when we come together as a community.⁶ And yet, sometimes we are unable to. Sometimes we find ourselves utterly alone, distant or isolated from the comfort and

strength of community. When this happens, not only do *we* have the power to transform our prayer from the prayer of the individual to the prayer of the many, God transforms our prayer.

Across time and space, we knit ourselves together.

Shemot Rabbah asks, what does it mean when Psalms refers to God as the One who hears prayer (Psalms 65:3)? The *midrash* answers:

שמות רבה כא:ד

אמר רבי פנחס בשם רבי מאיר
ורבי ירמיה בשם רבי חייא בר
אבא: בשעה שישאל מתפללין
אין אתה מוצא שכל מתפללין
כאחד, אלא כל כנסיה וכנסיה מתפ-
ללת בפני עצמה, הכנסת הזו תחלה
ואחר כך הכנסת האחרת, ומאחר

שכל הכנסיות גומרות כל התפ-
לות המלאך המונה על התפלות
בוטל כל התפלות שהתפללו בכל
הכנסיות כלן ועושה אותן עטרת
ונותן בראשו של הקדוש ברוך
הוא.

Shemot Rabbah 21:4

Rabbi Pinhas said in the name of Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Jeremiah in the name of Rabbi Hiya son of Abba: In the hour that Israel prays, you do not find that everyone prays as one—but rather each and every community prays on its own, this congregation first and after that another congregation, and after all the congregations have finished all of their prayers, the angel appointed over *tefillot* gathers up all the prayers that all of the congregations have prayed and makes out of them crowns and places them upon the head of the Holy Blessed One.

The *midrash* knows that despite our desire to pray together, we are not all in the same time zone, let alone the same physical space. Sometimes circumstances keep us apart. Instead, each community davens on their own, at their own time, separately. But, we don't stay separate. According to the *midrash*, an angel gathers each and every prayer of each and every congregation,

centuries.

5 We find a similar idea in the 18th century ethical work *Mesillat Yesharim* by Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto: The role of the *hasid*, the pious one, is to pray on behalf of one's entire generation and plead for their defense (*Mesillat Yesharim* 19:129-131).

6 The following idea, and use of Shemot Rabbah 21:4, was inspired by Sharon Cohen Anisfeld's piece "Praying Alone, Together" on the Hebrew College Community Blog.

perhaps each and every person, and weaves them all together. The angel then weaves each of our prayers into a crown that is placed on the head of the Holy One. Our individual prayers are transformed into a beautiful headpiece of overlapping cries, of longing, of sorrow, and love. We start out alone, yet we come together as one. The prayers of the individual become the prayers of the many.

Even when we are apart, we are never alone. My prayers as a child, tucked alone into bed at night, were never only the prayers of an individual; they were the prayers of the many. When we lie in bed at night, when we rise in the morning, we have the power to transform our prayer from *tefillat yahid* to *tefillat rabim*. When we insist that our needs are the needs of the

community and the community's needs are our own, we do something radical. Across time and space, we knit ourselves together, elevating our voices in prayer as we reach toward God. ♦

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