



Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein
Yom Kippur Alternative Service 5775/2014
“Praying from the Heart”

Tears stream down the woman’s face. She longs for children, but she is unable to conceive. Although her husband assures her of his love and devotion, her sorrow is so deep that she is unable to eat. She decides to seek comfort in the temple, praying to God through her tears. Her lips move, but she says nothing. She is praying “in her heart.”¹ The priest, sitting nearby, notices that no words emerge from the woman’s lips. He assumes that she is drunk. “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?” he angrily demands, “sober up!”² The woman responds: “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but **I have been pouring out my heart to Adonai.**”³

Our ancestors understood that prayer is not just about the words on the page—it is about what is in our hearts. The woman in this story is Hannah, and the redactors of the Bible thought her encounter with the priest Eli was so important that they recorded it in the Bible. Hannah’s story is one of the selections from the prophets that is read as the Haftarah on Rosh Hashanah morning. The authors of our prayer books wanted to send us a message on a day when we say the words of many, many prayers: **our hearts, too, are a vital element of prayer.**

Many of us, like Eli the priest, are uncomfortable with the idea of pouring out our hearts in prayer. We are fine with the familiar words of the prayers in our *siddur* (prayer book), but we often have a hard time connecting these words to our feelings. We are uneasy with the idea of prayer that is un-scripted.

Hannah’s prayer is spontaneous—it has no words. Her heartfelt expression illustrates what Jewish tradition calls *kavannah*— the Hebrew word for intention, concentration, or focus.⁴ *Kavannah* refers to what is in our hearts when we pray. *Kavannah* helps us understand that prayer is a longing, a yearning, a need that we have in our souls.

Our sages understood that *kavannah* is an essential component of prayer. An 18th century Hasidic teaching expands on this point:

“Do not think that the words of the prayer as you say them go up to God. It is not the words themselves that ascend; it is rather the burning desire of your heart that rises like smoke towards heaven. If your prayer consists only of words and does not contain your heart’s desire—how can it rise up to God?”⁵

A story is told about the Baal Shem Tov, the great Hasidic master. One Yom Kippur a poor illiterate shepherd boy enters the synagogue. The boy is very moved by the service, but feels frustrated that he

¹ 1 Samuel 1:13

² 1 Samuel 1:14

³ 1 Samuel 1:15

⁴ “Revitalizing Prayer,” p. 55, Reform Judaism Magazine, Fall 2014

⁵ *Or HaMeir* 3:166, quoted in “Revitalizing Prayer,” p. 55, Reform Judaism Magazine, Fall 2014

cannot read the prayers. He begins to whistle, the one thing he knows he can do beautifully; he wants to offer his whistling as a gift to God. The members of the congregation are horrified at what they see as the desecration of their service. Some people yell at the boy, and others want to throw him out. The Baal Shem Tov immediately stops them. "Until now," he says, "I could feel our prayers being blocked as they tried to reach the heavenly court. This young shepherd's whistling was so pure, however, that it broke through the blockage and brought all of our prayers straight up to God."⁶

This concern with what is in our hearts when we pray extends to Jewish legal codes as well. We read in the laws of prayer in the *Arba'ah Turim*, the 13th century legal code: "...on the condition that one's heart is focused in prayer, far better a few words **with kavannah** than many words **without kavannah**."⁷

Learning the words to prayers is easier than it is to understand how we can say these prayers from our hearts.

For many of us, the idea of spontaneous prayer from the heart is foreign.

This was certainly my experience during rabbinical school when I began my training as a hospital chaplain. I was nervous as I walked into the room of one of the first patients I was assigned to visit. Our role, as chaplains-in-training who came from several different religious traditions, was to "minister" to everyone on our assigned units, regardless of their religious tradition. The patient in the room had come into the hospital for an orthopedic procedure that should have been routine. He got an infection while he was in the hospital that required intravenous antibiotics and which resulted in a much longer hospital stay than planned. It wasn't clear when he would be able to go home.

I introduced myself as the unit's chaplain, and he began to tell me about how important his Christian faith was to him. His faith had been a tremendous source of strength during his hospitalization. He told me that, early that morning, one of the cleaning staff who was mopping the floor in the patient's room, sensed his distress and offered to pray with him. The patient then extended his hands to me and asked me to pray with him. I knew the words of many prayers **by heart**. What I didn't know was how to pray **from my heart**.

Many of us have a definition of prayer that is too narrow. Prayer is saying the words of familiar prayers in the synagogue or at home. Prayer is **also** our exclamation of joy and delight when we see a gorgeous sunset. Prayer is the love that we feel in our hearts when we hug our children or our parents. Prayer is the holy work that we do when we repair the world, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us. After he marched in Selma with Dr. Martin Luther King and other religious leaders during the Civil Rights movement, Heschel wrote:

"For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."⁸

⁶ [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/hasidim & mitnagdim.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/hasidim_%20mitnagdim.html)

⁷ *Orach Chayim* 1:1

⁸ Susannah Heschel, "Following in my father's footsteps: Selma 40 years later," <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~vox/0405/0404/heschel.html>

Prayer from the heart, whether through the words in our *siddur*, through our actions, or the wordless prayers in our soul, directs our attention to the world around us and to how we want to respond to the world.⁹ Prayer from the heart encourages us to look at ourselves, and at the gap between the kind of people we are and the kind of people we know we should be—as we are doing today on Yom Kippur. This kind of prayer should change us. The Baal Shem Tov, taught that “If after you have prayed, you are the same as before you prayed, why did you pray?” Rabbi Heschel taught: “Prayer may not save us, but prayer makes us worth saving.”

Judaism’s emphasis on prayer from the heart is particularly helpful when we or someone we love is gravely ill. When we pray for others who are ill, as we do with the *Mi’Shebeirach* prayer for healing, our hope is that our prayers will surround those who are ill with love and concern. Our loved ones who are ill will know that they have friends and a community that care for them enough to make them the focus of their thoughts in prayer and to beseech God on their behalf.¹⁰

Jewish tradition teaches that God is especially close to the broken hearted and those crushed in spirit.¹¹ When we despair, when we are sick at heart—we can pour our hearts out to God, as did the Psalmist:

I called to You, O Adonai
To my Lord I made appeal.¹²

Hear, O Adonai, and have mercy upon me.
O Adonai, be my help.¹³

You heal broken hearts
And bind up wounds.¹⁴

O Adonai, hear my prayer;
Let my cry come before you.¹⁵

I would like to challenge all of us, this year, to bring our hearts to our prayers.

I have a special challenge for the students here today who will soon begin, or who have already begun, their studies to become bar or bat mitzvah. You are learning to say and to chant a number of prayers. I would like to invite you to maintain a sense of wonder and curiosity about the big ideas behind these prayers. Becoming a bar or bat mitzvah is not about memorizing the words of the prayers, but about saying these ancient words from your heart. Parents: talk to your children about what these words mean! Share with your children what these words mean to you. Your teachers, your rabbis, your

⁹ “Revitalizing Prayer,” p. 57, Reform Judaism Magazine, Fall 2014

¹⁰ “Praying in Hard Times: The Soul’s Imaginings,” p. 8. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Life Lights.

¹¹ Psalm 34:19

¹² 30:9

¹³ 30:11

¹⁴ 147:3

¹⁵ 102:2

cantors, your Religious School Director, your tutors are here to help, to answer your questions, to talk with you about what is behind the prayers that you are working so hard to learn.

I challenge all of us to expand our idea of prayer in the coming year.

When we see something beautiful in nature, when our children do something that fills us with pride—this is prayer. When we are worried and sad and frightened and when our hearts are broken and we open our hearts to God—this is prayer.

Today—a day when we say many prayers in our prayer-book—is a good day to start listening to the prayers of our hearts. Yom Kippur is a day when we fast, when we do not work or go to school. Many of us spend the entire day in the synagogue. I invite you to experiment with different kinds of prayer, using this sacred day to open your hearts in prayer. Allow your attention to shift from the words on the page in the prayer book to what is in your heart. During the afternoon take a walk, experience the beauty of the world around you. Imagine the faces of those who are not with you today, and about what they meant in your life. This, too, is prayer.

Hannah's prayer comes from her despair that she cannot have a child. She pours out the sadness in her heart to God. When Eli the priest realizes that he has judged Hannah unfairly, he, too, joins in her prayer: "May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him."¹⁶ Hannah conceives and bears a son, Samuel. Although our prayers may not be answered in the way that Hannah's was, her story teaches us that God hears what is in our hearts if only we will open them.

May this be the year that we open our hearts in prayer.

May our prayers draw us closer to God and to those around us.

May we know that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts

Are always acceptable to God,

Our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amein.

¹⁶ 1 Samuel 1:17