

26 July 2008 – Parashat Mattot
Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald
Hebrew Educational Alliance

Prayer:

What we do in shul is the spiritual calisthenics that prepare us for how to live out in the world.

“Do you like to pray? You davven don’t you?... so, do you like to davven?” {pause} That’s the question my teacher, Rabbi Ed Feinstein, asked me in front of seven other rabbinical students. You might think that in a rabbinical school, such a question would be silly. Rabbis all love prayer, right?! But I looked right back at him and I said, “Sometimes I find prayer meaningful... but often, I struggle with prayer.” Now, you might think the next thing he did was kick me out of class and report me to the administration as a heretic. But he didn’t kick me out. And from the corner of my eye, I think I saw a couple of my classmates nodding empathetically.

I’ll let you in on a little secret. A lot of people find prayer challenging – even rabbis and cantors. Prayer is tough. Now don’t get me wrong – I know the liturgy and I know the melodies. I can davven with the best of ‘em. What I continually struggle with is not the mechanics of prayer, but in finding *meaning* in the experience. I suspect that many of you feel some of the same challenges with prayer. But here we are... in shul. We sit together on Shabbat mornings for more than 3 hours (or less, for those of you who just walked in) and we’re doing a lot of praying. So, what’s the point of prayer?

Prayer is not simply “talking to God.” If you want to talk to God, you can do that in your own words, all by yourself, and at any time. But, the more interesting question to me is why do we come together *here* and pray *these* words, out of *this* book, written by people a long time ago in a language that most of us don’t speak fluently? {pause}

This week’s Torah portion, Mattot, starts with a lengthy discussion of the laws of vows. The parsha begins: “If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips.” {pause} The Torah means to teach that words are not simply sounds that we emit from our mouths. They have meaning and power. So what is the power of all the words we say in shul?

The great 20th Century theologian, Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “Prayer must not be dissonant with the rest of living. The mercifulness, gentleness, which pervades us in moments of prayer is but a ruse or a bluff if it is inconsistent with the way we live at other moments. The divorce of liturgy and living, of prayer and practice, is more than a scandal; it is a disaster. A word uttered in prayer is a promise, an earnest, a commitment. If the promise is not kept, we are guilty of violating a promise... What is handicapping prayer is not the antiquity of the Psalms but our own crudity and spiritual immaturity.” How do we wed prayer and practice? Again, prayer is a way of looking at the world. It isn’t just what happens in this room. What we do in shul is the spiritual calisthenics that prepare us for how to live out in the world. Imagine what it

would be like to hold on to that sense of reverence and awe you feel when you hear the cantor singing U'netaneh Tokef or Kol Nidre and take it out into the world with you every day.

So let's consider a prayer that I'm sure nearly all of us know – Adon Olam. (If you want to follow along, you can find Adon Olam on page 6 of Siddur Sim Shalom or 154 in A.S.) {Pause} Virtually every service I've ever been to ends with Adon Olam. It appears in the liturgy for waking up and it is said as part of the bedtime Shma. We set it to all sorts of popular melodies – I've heard everything from the William Tell Overture (the Lone Ranger) to Rock Around the Clock. Yet, Adom Olam is one of the most profound and moving liturgical poems ever written. There's nothing silly about it. In fact, Adom Olam speaks one of the most profound truths of human experience and has themes that are found in many of our prayers.

We don't know who wrote Adon Olam. Based on its poetic structure and style, we think it comes from 12th or 13th century Spain. It appears in Siddurim going back to the 14th century. I'd like to take a look at Adon Olam for a few minutes and use it as an example from which we can learn how to relate to prayer in general.

The first six verses expound on the transcendent qualities of God and God's power as Creator:
{read in Hebrew and translate}

| | |
|--|---|
| ¹ <i>Eternal Lord who reigned, Before all beings were created</i> | אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר מֶלֶךְ בְּטָרָם כָּל יְצִיר נִבְרָא |
| ² <i>When everything was made according to God's will, It was then that God was called Melech</i> | לְעֵת נַעֲשָׂה בְּחֻצְצוֹ כָּל אֲזִי מֶלֶךְ שְׁמוֹ נִקְרָא |
| ³ <i>And when all shall cease to be, God alone will reign supreme</i> | וְאַחֲרַי כְּכֹלֹת הַכֹּל לְבַדּוֹ יִמְלֹךְ נוֹרָא |
| ⁴ <i>And He was, and He is, And He shall be, crowned in glory</i> | וְהוּא הָיָה וְהוּא הָיָה וְהוּא יִהְיֶה בְּתַפְאֲרָה |
| ⁵ <i>God is One, and there is no second, To compare to Him or to consort with Him,</i> | וְהוּא אֶחָד וְאֵין שֵׁנִי לְתַמְשִׁיל לּוֹ לְתַחְבִּירָה |
| ⁶ <i>Without beginning, without end, Power and dominion is His.</i> | בְּלִי רֵאשִׁית בְּלִי תְּכֵלִית וְלֹא הָעוֹ וְהַמְשָׁרָה |

How is God being described here? Who is this God? How do you feel when you read these words? Can you relate to God in this way? {take responses?}

The image painted at the beginning of Adon Olam is of a transcendent God. God who creates and reigns. *I believe in this God.* I see this God all around me manifested in the wonders of nature and in the mysteries of life. {pause} *But, I can't talk to this God.* This is the God I have trouble praying to. I believe in God's transcendent power the way I believe in gravity... but I can't pray to gravity either. Up to this point the poet of Adon Olam hasn't described a

relationship between God and us. The transcendent God at the beginning of Adon Olam feels very far away.

Sometimes when I think of the vastness of the universe and its Creator, I am filled with fear and I feel very small. In this great eternity, is there a God who knows me?... who understands my pain and my joy?... is there a God who sees the injustice in the world?... is there a God who cares?

And then something remarkable happens in Adon Olam. In the 7th verse there is a sharp turn...

⁷ *And yet He is my God, and my Living Redeemer,*

And my stronghold in troubled times

⁸ *He is my sign and my banner,*

The portion of my cup on the day I call.

וְהוּא אֱלֹהֵי יְחִי גֹאֲלִי ⁷

וְצוּר חֲבֻלִי בְעֵת צָרָה

וְהוּא נֹסִי וּמָנוֹס לִי ⁸

מִנֵּת כּוֹסֵי בַיּוֹם אֶקְרָא

Despite God's unfathomable distance and otherness, God is also near to me. God is my Living Redeemer – an active and integral part of my existence.

The last two verses are even more intimate:

⁹ *In God's hand, I deposit my spirit,*

At the time I shall sleep and when I wake.

¹⁰ *And with my spirit, my body,*

God is with me, and I shall not fear.

בְּיַדוֹ אֶפְקִיד רוּחִי ⁹

בְּעֵת אִישׁוֹן וְאֶעֱיָרָה

וְעִם רוּחִי גִוְיָתִי ¹⁰

יְיָ לִי וְלֹא אֵירָא

There are few phrases more succinct and eloquent than the last words of *Adon Olam*: “God is with me and I shall not fear.” At once it is a statement of humility – a recognition that this chaotic world is not in our control; and it is also an affirmation of faith in the order that is brought by God.

When I can calm the turmoil in my soul. When I can stand before the vastness and confusion of the universe and transform my fear into awe and wonder, then there's a possibility of hearing something else. Listen again to Adon Olam:

{clap out the rhythm}

A-don O-lam, a-sheer ma-lach...

That rhythm that makes Adon Olam so easy to set to all those silly melodies is called iambic meter. {pause} It is also the rhythm of our hearts. The subtle and profound truth of Adon Olam is that in the overwhelming complexity and vastness of the universe, where God can feel so far away, there is order. We don't will our hearts to beat – somehow they just do. God isn't just out there, but God is also inside us. God is in the rhythm of our hearts and in our breath. And when I think of Adon Olam this way, then I don't feel so alone anymore. God remains a mystery, but not one to be feared. Instead, I am filled with wonder and gratitude. As long as I can feel the rhythm beating in my chest, I know that God is not as far away as it sometimes feels. “Adonai li” – God is with me; “v'lo irah” – and I shall not fear.

Dr. Heschel taught that “Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious [person’s] attitude toward history and nature.” And, “The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is *to take things for granted.*”

Wonder, Heschel taught, is the beginning of living a religious life. Without it, we cannot cultivate a relationship to the Eternal.

When your sitting in shul take your time in prayer. Don’t worry about reading every word. Slow down and take a moment to consider the wisdom in the words in this book. If you have trouble praying, like I do, pick just one prayer to meditate on.

Ribono Shel Olam (Master of the Universe) help us to cultivate in ourselves a sense of awe and gratitude so that we may see the many miracles that were there all along.

Shabbat Shalom