

Why Do We Pray? Extended Sources

Source Sheet by Sam Blustin

Berakhot 26a

ברכות כ"ו א

The question was asked: How is it if one erred and omitted the afternoon Tefillah — shall he say it twice in the evening ? If thou thinkest thou canst answer [by quoting] "If one erred and omitted the evening Tefillah, he should say it twice in the morning," [that is different] because it is one day ; as it is written, "And there was evening and there was morning one day " (Gen. i. 5). **But here the Tefillah is the substitute for the sacrifice, and the day having passed, the sacrifice becomes void. Or is it perhaps because Tefillah is supplication, and one may pray whenever he wishes?**

איבעיא להו טעה ולא התפלל מנחה מהו שיתפלל ערבית ב' את"ל טעה ולא התפלל ערבית מתפלל שחרית ב' משום דחד יומא הוא דכתיב (בראשית א, ה) ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום אחד אבל הכא תפלה במקום קרבן היא וכיון דעבר יומו בטל קרבנו או דילמא כיון דצלותא רחמי היא כל אימת דבעי מצלי ואזיל

R. Shneur Zalman of Liady (1747-1813), founder of Chabad

While it is true that the forms of the prayers are Rabbinic and that prayers must be recited three times a day, the concept of prayer and its essential idea belong to the very foundation of the Torah - namely, to know the Lord, to recognize His greatness and His glory with a serene mind and, through contemplation, to have these fixed firmly in the mind. A man must reflect on this theme until the contemplative soul is awakened to love the Lord's name, to cleave to Him and to His Torah, and greatly to desire His commandments. Nowadays, all this can only be achieved by reciting the verses of praise and the benedictions before and after the Shema with clear diction and in a loud voice so as to awaken the powers of concentration... It was otherwise with regard to R. Simeon b. Yohai and his colleagues. For them the recitation of the Shema alone was sufficient for them to attain all this. It was all achieved in a blink of the eye, so humble were their hearts in their covenantal loyalty. But, nowadays,

anyone who has drawn near to God and has once tasted the fragrance of prayer knows and appreciates that without prayer no man can lift hand or foot to serve God in truth, unlike the (service) of men who learn by rote.

Exodus 10:24-26

(24) Pharaoh then summoned Moses and said, "Go, worship the LORD! Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind; even your children may go with you." (25) But Moses said, "You yourself must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to the LORD our God; (26) our own livestock, too, shall go along with us—not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of the LORD our God; and we shall not know with what we are to worship the LORD until we arrive there."

שמות י"ב:כ"ד-כ"ו

(כד) וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר
לְכוּ עֲבַדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה רֶק צֹאנְכֶם
וּבְקָרְכֶם יֵצֵג גַּם־טַפְכֶּם יֵלֶךְ עִמָּכֶם:
(כה) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה גַם־אֶתָּה תֵתֵן
בִּידֵינוּ זִבְחִים וְעֹלֹת וְעֹשִׂינוּ לַיהוָה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ: (כו) וְגַם־מִקְלָבֵנוּ יֵלֶךְ עִמָּנוּ
לֹא תִשָּׂא רַפְסָה כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ נִקַּח לַעֲבֹד
אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶנְחֵנוּ לֹא־יָדָע
מִה־נַּעֲבֹד אֶת־יְהוָה עַד־בֹּאֵנוּ שָׁמָּה:

Netivot Shalom, Introduction to Essay on Prayer (1911-2000)

And to clarify the holy words of [R. Hayim Vital] concerning what our master said in *Birkat Avaraham*... on the teaching of the Sages (see B.Ta'anit 2a) "You will serve/worship (*avadetchem*) YHVH your God with all of your heart (Deut. 11:13). What is this *avodah* that is of the heart? It is *tefillah* (prayer)."

This is, in my opinion, like when one cultivates (*m'avdim*) a field. At first one plows the soil and then one sows seeds and then one waters -- and only then does one begin to see growth.

Similarly with *tefillah* (prayer). First, one plows deeply to open the heart. The one plants worlds of *tefillah* into the heart - this is sowing seeds. And then one pours out one's heart like water in the presence of YHVH, this is water. And then you can grow salvations.

Questions: What do we need to do to soften the ground to get ready to plant seeds? If each word of prayer is a seed, what kind of plant/salvation does each word grow? What does he mean by salvations (*matzmiah yeshuot*)?

Heschel - Prayer as a beam of light - p. 11 Lev Shalem Siddur

"Prayer is no panacea, no substitute for action. It is, rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness. It is in this light that we who grope, stumble, and climb, discover where we stand, what surrounds us, and the course which we should choose." - Abraham Joshua Heschel

Yehuda HaLevi

Prayer is for one's soul what nourishment is for one's body. The blessing of one's prayer lasts until the time of the next prayer, just as the strength derived from one meal lasts until another... During the time of prayer, one cleanses the soul of all that has passed over it and prepares it for the future.

Shalom Noah Berzovsky

Songs to God not only express joy; they express pain as well. There is no greater prayer than pouring out one's heart over the distance one feels from God.

Reuven Hammer - The Effect of Prayer

Prayer is a way of sensitizing ourselves to the wonder of life, of expressing gratitude, and of praising and acknowledging the reality of God. One need not believe that God will interfere with the ongoing process of nature to feel that prayer is worthwhile. We may have different understanding of what God is. No definition we have is sufficient or answers all doubts and questions. To be aware that God exists - that there is more in the universe than physical matter, that a moral order is inherent in creation, that humans are responsible for their conduct and can help to bring about the perfection, or at least the improvement, of the world and of life - that is sufficient reason for prayer.

"**Rabbi Ami** taught: One's prayer is answered only if one takes one's heart into one's hands, as it is said, 'Let us lift up our heart with our hands' (Lamentations 3:41)." - Babylonian Talmud

Hayim Ibn Attar (based on) - Lev Shalem Siddur p. 159

One should pray as a beggar knocking on a door and wish for a time of generosity.

Zev Wolf of Zhitomir

A Hasidic master taught: it is written in many books that if one wants to enter the

inner world of prayer, to present speech before God, one needs, at the time of prayer, to attach oneself to all that is living and all that exists in the world. The meaning of this is as it is written in the Book of Psalms, "You created all with wisdom" (104:25) - that is there is nothing in this world which is, God forbid, extraneous... When a person seeking inspiration pays attention to this - reaching for an understanding of that which is clothed by everything in this world, animal life, plant life, and sheer matter, everything that was created; and arouses one's heart with this wisdom, speaks of it before God with love and reverence - then that person fulfills the will of the creator, who created the world in all its fullness.

Saul Magid on R' Nachman of Bratzlav- Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Nachman of Bratzlav's *Likkutei MoHaRa*

R. Nachman suggested that the heart before prayer is like God before creation. It is the place of unbridled emotions incapable of sustaining any form and thus potentially very destructive. It is also filled with unbridled desire yet devoid of yearning since, like the *eyn sof*, it contains no distinction and thus has nothing to yearn for. R. Nachman suggested that prayer, like creation, must be preceded by *zimzum*, that is, an emptiness in the heart, which will house the human desire to pray... One must create the void of divine absence in one's own heart in order for prayer to be effectual, just as God created his absence in order to make way for his finite presence. (p. 510)

Issachar Dov Baer of Zlotchov

One cannot begin to pray properly until one has made oneself as nothing.