

Last spring while on vacation in Arizona, I came across someone reading the distinguished thinker Moshe Halbertal's book on Maimonides. Not your average poolside read.

"How's the book?" I asked him.

"It's slow going," he answered. "It'll probably take me a couple of years of reading in shul. I got it from my son."

The son, reclining on his lounge nearby, commented, "It was a hard book—I read it for two years in shul."

Much to my surprise, this observant, Modern Orthodox father and son were reading alternative texts during Shabbat morning services. Well, I thought, if the Modern Orthodox aren't praying in shul, what does that say about what we Conservative Jews are doing? Maybe it's true, as someone observed, that the American synagogue *is* where prayer goes to die.

Yet here we are this Rosh Hashanah, prayer books in hand. What are we doing when we pray?

In discussing prayer, three questions seem fundamental to ask:

Whom do we pray *to*?

What do we pray *for*?

Who do we pray *as*?

The first question, whom do we pray to, asks us to define God. What if the God I believe in doesn't answer prayers? How can I pray if I don't believe?

At one end of the spectrum we find those who pray to a God they believe in with confidence; praising, thanking, petitioning God, and receiving a sense of fulfillment that God hears their prayers, listens to their suffering, and responds to them. Some of us may have this kind of relationship with God, like Facetime with a grandchild. They are always glad to hear from us, and always have something to say. I think of this group as the religious one-percenters. It must be nice!

Others of us lack such consistency or clarity in our relationship with God and prayer. Instead, we may have experienced what William James referred to as a "religious moment: a sense of the

presence of something that can't be present, but which feels real." There is a sense of mystery, and Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that we can be loyal to these fleeting moments of certainty even after they have faded away.

This might be like a text exchange between a newly romantic couple. It seemed like there was a spark at the time they met, but now? The memory burns brightly; it's just not as constant as we hoped it would be. The relationship is in continuous need of testing.

And still others of us—the majority I think—are waiting to experience that kind of religious moment that will allow us to transcend the rational world in which our scientific knowledge anchors us. We are logging on to Facebook hoping for a friend request from the Almighty.

Whichever God app you have downloaded, believer, non-believer, or somewhere in between, I would like to offer some additional ways Jewish thinkers have approached prayer, which can, I hope, be relevant to all of us regardless of where we position ourselves on the faith/doubt continuum.

Many of my thoughts today are culled from content posted by the Drisha Institute, which hosted a series of distinguished speakers on the topic of prayer, and especially Rabbi Shai Held's interpretation of Rabbi Heschel.

Now for the second question, What do we pray for?

I would guess that most people pray for strength to face their challenges; they pray for a good outcome; they pray for the welfare of their loved ones. They may offer prayers of gratitude, or prayers of grievance. They pray for a Democrat to win the White House. Let me present you with an alternative, and I think, beautiful view of prayer, as taught by Rabbi Heschel.

Heschel says that to be human is to *be* a problem—not to *have* a problem, but to *be* a problem. Man's existential problem is, "How do we find meaning in a life filled with absurdity?" His answer is the "theology of self-transcendence", the shift from a focus on the self to the non-self, or from one's own needs to the needs of others.

When I am concerned with myself, I am viewing things with expediency: What's in it for me? How can I use this? By contrast, when I am concerned with others, I am responding, relating and

appreciating. Heschel wanted us to live our lives with what he called Radical Amazement, in gratitude for the miracles of our world.

Prayer, Heschel says, allows us to overcome egocentrism and fashion a different kind of self. Prayer is an antidote to the culture of modernity. It lets our deepest self emerge out of our surface self.

Our goal in life is not to find answers to *our* questions, but to offer ourselves as the answer to God's questions. Prayer gives us the opportunity to reflect, and to ask, "Where are we in our journey? How are we doing?" We can become a drop of God-seeking in an ocean of God-forgetting.

How does this work in practice? What do we pray *for*?

When we offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving we are thinking not about ourselves but about whatever it is we think created our world. This type of prayer is an expression of gratitude and humility: no matter who or what I think created the world, I am certain that I haven't done it, and neither have you. The Pacific Ocean, the Maine coastline, a baby's laugh, all exist, and I had nothing to do with it.

In petitionary prayer when we beseech God, we are again focused away from ourselves and toward God. If this seems counter-intuitive, consider that the admission that we need help, that we are suffering, is a reminder of our vulnerability. God may be exiled, or distant from us because our egos have taken up all the available space, but by focusing our prayers away from ourselves, we have created space for God to return.

As the Kotzker Rebbe famously said, Where does God dwell? Where we let God in. "Step aside, selfish desires; Come in, the needs of the world."

Thus, when we transcend our own needs and self, we are better able to act on behalf of others. This, according to Heschel, creates meaning in our lives. To quote him again, "Every deed has meaning; every word has power."

Finally, our third question, Who do we pray *as*?

If we believe, as Heschel wrote, that, "We live and act according to the image of humanity we cherish", then ultimately, we pray as human beings in search of that humanity. Prayer requires us to acknowledge the demands Judaism makes on us. How does it do this?

First, and obviously, as Jews, we pray as members of a community. We recite the same prayers as all other Jews. We recite these same prayers whether or not we have the proper kavannah, or intention, and whether or not we have a personal need for the prayer. There is a reason for this; to remind us that we have an obligation—a religious obligation—to the community. If we are in good health, the *mi she-berach* reminds us to care for those who are ill. If we are doing well, we are reminded of those who are not. If a prayer doesn't apply to me, it surely applies to someone in my community.

Or, perhaps we are practicing prayer as a skill, preparing for a time when we will need it, or when it will be personally meaningful. We memorize the vocabulary, not knowing when the final exam will be held. Maybe this year we have sinned with our eyes, maybe next year it will be with our speech. Whatever it is, learning the words readies us for the test. We pray as insecure, fragile members of the human race.

If we accept that the texts we read reflect and shape our experience, as Rabbi Shai Held has taught, then prayer has an additional important role in guiding us. The words of a prayer—nearly any psalm, for example—can express our hopes for the world we wish to inhabit, and give us the vocabulary to articulate it. It can provide a glimpse into a future world, and give us a way to invite this vision into our daily lives. Thus, we pray as a people whose mission is to act to achieve that vision; it encourages us to live lives that are crafted in service of that ideal.

Whom do we pray to?

What do we pray for?

Who do we pray as?

Heschel said, "Prayer may not save us, but it may make us worthy of being saved". May our prayers this Rosh Hashanah make us all worthy.