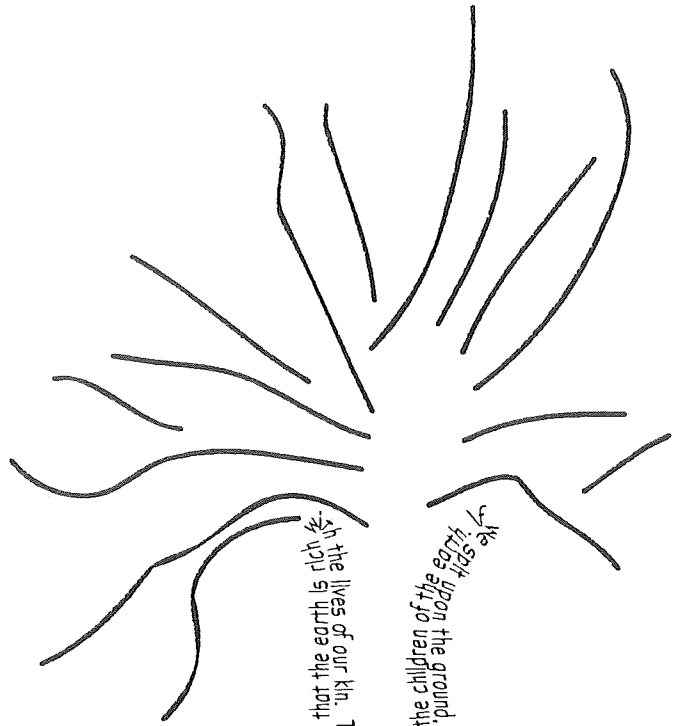


That Thing Called Prayer

Magshimim Nesiya

July 17-19, 2000



Teach your children... that the earth is our mother.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. We spit upon ourselves.

Text from... Ted Perry, 1970. Speech often attributed to Chief Seattle, 1851

must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandparents. So that they will respect

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? ...If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

The Shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and that each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events and memories... The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

Our rivers are our brothers, they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our canoes, and feed our children. If we sell you our land, you must remember, and teach your children, that the rivers are our brothers and yours, and you must therefore give the rivers the kindness you would give any brother.

I Am Not a God

A Hasidic Tale About Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk

It was a bitter frosty winter. One night, Menahem Mendel, the old rebbe of Kotsk, sat all alone by his stove, deep in study of the Gemara. The windows were covered with frost. He was reciting aloud at the top of his voice. He did not see or hear a sleigh pulling up before his house and a man asking to see him.

In the vestibule, the rabbe's attendant dozed by the stove. When the man, dressed in a fur coat and covered with frost, entered, the attendant awoke and asked what he wanted.

The man put down the driver's whip near the door, shook off some of the ice, rubbed his hands. "I must see the rabbe, I have come from a village many miles away, on behalf of my only daughter who has been three days in labor. It is a matter of life and death. Let me see the rabbe."

So absorbed was the rebbe in his study, reciting so loudly, the attendant was afraid to enter. The man pleaded with him, even promising him gifts. But the attendant stood tiptoe at the door, listening. The man became impatient, as if he were on hot coals. He cajoled and he threatened, but it was no use. It was no small matter interrupting the rebbe at his studies! The man, seeing the attendant was afraid to enter, said: "I will go in myself." The attendant tried to stop him, they struggled; the man pushed the attendant aside, and threw open the door. He began to weep: "Sainted Rebbe, a daughter of Israel is in danger. She has been three days in labor. There is no doctor in the village and the weather is too frosty to bring her into town. Rebbe, have pity, pray for her!"

The rebbe looked at him, then he went to the door and shouted: "I am not a god. What do you want of me? Why are you pleading with me? Plead with God!"

He told the man to leave and returned to his studies. The man was so upset that the attendant tried to comfort him: "God will help. With God's help, your daughter will be all right. Don't worry, the rebbe knows what he's doing."

But the man would not be comforted. With renewed courage, once again he burst open the door to the rebbe's study and fell at the rebbe's feet, imploring him. The rebbe's wife and children came running to see what was the matter. The women, too, began weeping, and the rebbe's wife entreated: "Mendel, say something to him. It is a matter of life and death."

The rebbe did not reply, his head still bent over the Gemara. The man still lay on the floor, bleating like a calf. The neighbors, too, had come running. Then, pacing up and down his study, the rebbe shouted, "What do these village Jews think? Do they think I am a priest that they kiss my shoes? I am not a god. Go home, pray to God, and you daughter will be well."

But the man kept wailing. "Rebbe, help me; only you, sainted rebbe; I will stay here until you promise me that the birth will go well."

The study was full now. The neighbors were crying, some women even said the man was right to insist on the rebbe's blessing. The rebbe himself stood at a window, his head pressed against a frozen pane. The room was heavy with anguish. Then the rebbe cried out: "Fools, dolts, why have you come here? Do you think I am a god? That I can bring the dead back to life? You think that I, Mendel Kotsker, have influence in Heaven? That if I choose I can turn the frost into a heat wave? Fools, asses. Out! Out! Out!"

The attendant drove all the people out of the study, but the man would not leave. He remained on the floor, like a madman. The rebbe returned to the Gemara, his voice rising ever higher as if he wanted to blot out the incident. The man lay on the floor, perhaps an hour, sighing from time to time. When the rebbe finished, he put his kershief on the Gemara, and turned to the man. They looked at each other. Then the rebbe said, "Your horse must be frozen. Why are you waiting?" The man began to weep anew: "I cannot go home, rebbe, unless you help me!"

How can I help you?" asked the rebbe calmly. "I am not a doctor and certainly not a god. Go home. God will probably help you."

His word took effect. The man arose and said goodbye. He took his whip, got into his sleigh, and quickly drove away.

The next day the man returned, cheerful. The attendant asked, "Are congratulations in order?"

"Double congratulations. My daughter had two boys."

The rebbe received him with a smile; "Did you need my blessing?"

"Rebbe," replied the man, "Your last words yesterday helped. At the very moment you were telling me to go home my daughter gave birth."

Every blade of grass sings poetry to God without ulterior motives or alien thoughts- without consideration of reward. How good and lovely it is, then, when one is able to hear this song of the grasses. It is therefore a precious thing to conduct oneself with piety when strolling among them. (Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav)

Rabbi Nachman's Prayer

Master of the Universe

grant me the ability to be alone;

May it be my custom to go outdoors each day

Among the trees and the grass,

Among all growing things;

And, there may I be alone

to enter into prayer

There I may express all that is in my heart

Talking to you, the one to whom I belong.

The child of a certain rabbi used to wander in the woods. At first his father let him wander, but over time he became concerned. The woods were dangerous. The father did not know what lurked there.

He decided to discuss the matter with his child. One day he took him aside and said, "You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods. I wonder, why do you go there?" The boy said to his father, "I go there to find God."

"That is a very good thing," the father replied gently. "I am glad you are searching for God. But, my child, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?"

"Yes," the boy answered, "but I am not." (Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav)

When you say "Blessed are You"...you should think that He is standing before you, as it says, "I have placed the Lord before me always"; and you should have the fear of God on your face, and love of God within you, and speak with the full intention and concentration of your heart. (*Sefer HaRokeach*, quoted in *Reshit Hochmah*, Sha'ar HaKedusha, chap. 14, #32)

On Grace After Meals...

The tradition takes the feeling of satisfaction after a meal and, connecting it with God, turns it into thankfulness. Thus, the natural feeling is lifted up into the realm of spirituality. This happiness, now religious and spiritual, can be lifted up even further and carried into singing. (Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, p. 272)

Before you say the Grace after Meals, have the *kavvanah* that God has been very kind to you in having given you this food to enliven you, and through this you will come to a joyful state of mind and to love of God. (*Derech Hayim*, 6-18)

To understand prayer, it is essential that we see it in a larger context. When reflected through the prism of Jewish worship, however, prayer is much more than that. It is an integral part of the complete religious life of a Jew- an essential part, but nevertheless only a part. It cannot be isolated from the rest except artificially, for it interweaves with everything else to create the harmonious whole that is Judaism. The other major components of a full Jewish life are study, ritual practice, and moral living. Although prayer is our way of communicating with God, we must remember that it is not the only way. All of these paths lead to God, and all of them are interconnected. (Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*, p.3)

Prayer for Hope

Set all at peace with wisdom of heart.

Let all who seek truth find it in life and find the way to teach it.

Let all people both great and small be protected from destructive thought.

And may all see and live a truth which is good in Your eyes.

Through that truth let us live in peace and freedom with only the confines of Your will.

Blessed are you, Lord, our God who gives hope.

Chevruta Questions:
That Thing Called Prayer

1. What is prayer? Looking at some of the prayers and comments on prayer here, how would you describe prayer in one sentence?
2. What makes prayer "count"?
3. Look in the prayer book and see if you see any common themes, or basic categories of prayer. Are these all prayers, or is the "Prayer Service" Made up of more than just prayers?
4. What is the difference between blessing and prayer?
5. What is the purpose of the Amidah? What is it about... are there more than one meanings of the prayer?
6. What does a piece of the prayer service like the Shema do? What does saying this twice a day do for us?

Chevruta Questions:
Prayer and Me

1. Do you find any of the prayers speak to you more than others? Why?
2. According to Reuven Hammer, "Individual prayer may be mainly a way of communicating with God and expressing our feelings, reactions, and needs." Do you agree or disagree? Why?
3. What makes you enjoy and connect with prayer? What pushes you away from prayer?
4. What does prayer mean to you?

Extra sources

"Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says 'Have you ever seen a wild beast or bird that possesses a craft? And none the less they sustain themselves without care, and were they not created to serve me? But I was created to serve my Maker. does it not follow that I should receive my maintenance without care? But I have performed my actions in evil and have forgone my support [and I have forfeited my right to support].'" (Mishna Kiddushin 4:14)

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said, If there be no [study of the] Law there is no good conduct, if there is no good conduct, if there be no good conduct there is no [study of the] Law; if there be no wisdom there is no fear [of God], if there be no fear [of God] there is no wisdom; if there be no understanding there is no knowledge, if there be no knowledge there is no understanding; If there be no flour there is no Torah, if there is no Torah there is no flour. (Mishna Avot 3:21)

He used to say, all who's wisdom is greater than his deeds, to what is he similar? To a tree who's branches are many, and who's roots are few, and the wind comes and uproots and overturns it on to its face, as it is said:(Jeremiah 17:6) "For he shall be like a juniper tree in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited." But all who's works are greater than her wisdom, to what is he similar? To a tree who's branches are few, and who's roots are many, that even if all the winds that are in the world come and blow on it, there is no moving it from its place. As it is said:(Jeremiah 17:8) "And she shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out its roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but its foliage shall be green; and shall not be anxious in the year of drought, neither shall it cease from yielding fruit." (Mishna Avot 3:22)

He who buys grain in the market, to what is he similar? To a child who is cut off from his mother, and although it is taken to homes of wet nurses it is not satisfied. And he who buys bread in the market, to what is he compared? To a man who digs his own grave - a wretched, precarious existence. But he who eats of his own produce is like a child reared at his mother's breast. (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 30:6/29a)

... the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there were no people to till the soil... (Genesis 2:5)

Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai said:

Three things are equal in importance: earth, Humans, and rain. Rabbi Levi said: And these three each consist of three letters (in Hebrew), to teach that without earth, there is no rain, and without rain, earth cannot endure; while without either, humans cannot exist. (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 13.3)

Two men were sailing on a boat when one of them began taking animal skins out of his bag to let them dry. The skins stank and the second man asked the first to put the skins away. The first answered, "What I do at my own seat is not your business." The second man thought for a moment and then took out a carpenter's drill. He began drilling a hole under his seat. The first man jumped up and said, "Are you crazy? You're going to kill us." The second man replied, "What I do at my own seat is not your business." (Adapted from Leviticus Rabbah 4:6 by Shomrei Adamah)

BLESSINGS FOR ALL OCCASIONS

Upon eating fruit of the tree:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי העץ

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who creates fruit of the tree.

Upon eating fruit of the ground:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי האדמה

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who creates fruit of the ground.

Upon smelling fragrant trees or shrubs:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, בורא עצי בשמים

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who creates fragrant trees.

Upon smelling fragrant herbs or plants:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, בורא עשבי בשמים

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who creates fragrant plants.

Upon seeing wonders of nature including, lightning, shooting stars, high mountains and a sunrise:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, עשה מעשה בראשית

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, source of creation.

Upon hearing thunder or seeing a storm:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who's strength and power fills the universe.

Upon seeing exceptionally beautiful creatures:

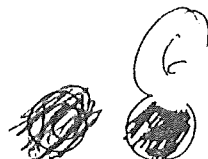
ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, שככה לו בעולמו

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who has such in the world.

Upon seeing exceptionally strange creatures:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, משנה הבריות

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who differentiates creatures.



BLESSINGS FOR ALL OCCASIONS

Upon seeing the ocean:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, שעשה את הים הגדול

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who made the great sea.

Upon seeing a rainbow:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, זוכר הברית, ונאמן בבריתו, וקים במאמרו

Blessed are you God creator of the universe, who remembers the covenant, is faithful to it, and keeps Your promise.

Upon doing or seeing something for the first time:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, שהחינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who grants us life, sustains us and helps us reach this day.

Upon rain or good news:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם, הטוב והמטיב

Blessed are you God, creator of the universe, who is good and does good.



SEEING NATURAL WONDERS...

A story is told: I had seen spectacular mountains in the Alps and the Rockies in Colorado. I didn't think Yosemite would be much different. More mountains, maybe some waterfalls I thought, and it will all be nice – at least I'll get out of the city. Driving from San Francisco through the dry heat of the desert, we pulled into the heart of Yosemite as the sun began to set. We got out of the car and were astounded. What we saw: trees five times bigger than any we'd ever seen, spectacular rocks climbing to the heavens, waterfalls cascading into lush valleys. We were struck silent.

MEDITATION

השתחוּ לַה' בְּהַדְרַת קֹדֶשׁ.

*Hishtachavu l'Adonai
b'hadrat kodesh.*

The world is God's
intensely holy place.

Hear God's voice in
the waters, in the
thunder. Hear God's
voice in the tall trees,
in the forest, in the
wilderness.

קוֹל ה' בְּכֹחַ, קוֹל ה' בְּהַדְרָה.

*Kol Adonai ba'ko'ach,
kol Adonai be'hadar.*

Hear God's voice in
power; hear God's
voice in beauty.

(Psalms 29:4)

RITUAL

In silence, take off (or
imagine taking off)
your shoes, allowing
your feet to touch the
ground. As you wit-
ness the majestic
beauty of high moun-
tains, vast deserts, sun-
rises, lightning and
shooting stars, take as
much time as you
need to acknowledge
that you stand on
holy ground.

BLESSING

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה עֲשֵׂה
מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית.

*Barukh atah oseh
ma'aseh b'reshit.*

Praised are You,
renewer of the works
of creation. Let me be
attentive to the won-
der of Your world.

הַלְלוּהוּ שֶׁמֶשׁ וּיְרֵחַ, הַלְלוּהוּ
כָּל כִּכְבֵּי אוֹר.

*Halleluhu shemesh
v'yarei'ach, Halleluhu
kol kokhvei or.*

Praised is God, sun
and moon, Praised is
God, all bright stars.

(Psalms 148:3)

TEACHING

And God called the
dry places "earth" and
the water-springs God
called "seas", and God
saw that it was good.
(Genesis 1:10)

The skies will rejoice,
the earth vibrate with
celebration, the sea
roar with its full
force, the fields sing
out, the trees of the
forest cry out in
ecstasy.

(Psalms 96:11-12)

Every blade of grass
has a guardian above
it. *(Zohar 1:34a)*

On seeing mountains,
hills, seas, rivers and
deserts, one should
say, "Blessed is the
One who creates."
*(Jerusalem Talmud:
Brakhot 9:1)*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה שֶׁכַּחַח לָנוּ בְּעוֹלָמוֹ.

Barukh atah she'kakhah lo b'olamo.

*Praised are You who has created
such beauty in Your world.*

