

PRAYER AS A UNITING FORCE

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Sometimes when we pray, especially if we're alone and facing a crisis, it seems like we're trying to make some kind of "deal" with God—as if by supplicating oneself in prayer, God will grant what we pray for.

It's a difficult proposition, because much of the time we're not sure *who* or *what* or *how* God is to us—even when we're praying. At other times, say when the health or life of a child or spouse or parent is threatened, we're reduced to desperate entreaties that are little more than emergency bail-out communications to heaven. These prayers are all variations on a single theme: "Help!—please God, save this life!"

In our desperation it's a natural inclination to offer ourselves up to God in exchange for the Divine kindness we're seeking. So we're tempted to vow to live better lives, in effect to do God's will, if only our loved one is saved.

For many of us, unfortunately, our scientific outlook rejects the possibility of any connection between (a) our pathetic pleading and vow of future moral action, and (b) the hoped-for Divine intervention. So one way we commonly understand this desperate bargaining with God is simply as an attempt to satisfy our emotional need to maintain hope when all seems lost because we feel powerless.

But there is another, far more spiritually efficacious way to understand such vows.

In Genesis 28:10-19, after Yaakov has managed to obtain for himself his father's blessing, he flees from his brother, from Eisav's anger and potential violence. He is going to the house of his maternal grandfather, his mother's father, Bethuel, to find a wife among the family of his uncle, his mother's brother, Lavan. On the way he has a dream in which he sees angels going up and down a ladder that reaches to heaven. When he wakes from the dream he realizes that he was in "the house of God . . . the gate of heaven." He takes the stone that he had used for a headrest as he slept, sets it up as a pillar, and then anoints it with oil.

The scripture then reads: "Then Yaakov vowed a vow, saying: if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back in peace to my father's house, then shall Adonai be my God. And this stone that I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house; and of all that

You [God] shall give me, I shall surely give a tenth [back] to You." (Genesis 28:20-22)

Is this vow, in fact, nothing more than an effort by Yaakov to "bargain" with God? Is Yaakov saying, in effect, if You guard my safety and ensure my success on this trip, I'll build a house for you and give back ten percent of what I receive from your goodness to promote and protect Your name in the world? And, by implication, if You don't do those things for me, I won't dedicate a house and 10 percent of my income to You?

Our Torah commentators explain that Yaakov's vow should *not* be interpreted as bargaining with God, because he had already been promised everything that he had asked for, and he had no reason to doubt God's word. Recall that in Genesis 28:15, God says to Yaakov in his dream: "Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land."

The lesson is that Yaakov is not setting conditions for God; he is not bargaining, but instead he is expressing his commitment to do God's will if he is favored with the right conditions—that is, if the obstacles that would prevent him from serving God are removed. According to Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997), ". . . If God would not grant him to return to his father's house, how would he be able to erect a temple on the spot? All that Yaakov's vow implied was: 'Give me the opportunity of serving You'."

But why then should Yaakov question whether God is going to fulfill the promises he has already made to him?

Because, as Nehama Leibowitz also teaches, in the Jewish tradition it is understood unequivocally that, "The righteous man cannot assume that he has been granted an irrevocable title deed to comfort and protection, and he has no longer to stand in awe of his Master but can do as he likes. . . . Yaakov did not cast doubt on God or His credibility, but on himself and his capacity to withstand temptation." Yaakov was implicitly questioning whether he had the ability to remain deserving of God's beneficence.

Yaakov was not bargaining with God but reinforcing through prayer his own commitment to use for the good all the benefits he might receive from God. According to the Midrash, Yaakov feared that because of his sinfulness he might lose the promised blessings, so he prayed that God would return him to his father's house, physically whole and

with all his possessions and knowledge, and protect him from idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed in the land he was entering. (Bereshit Rabbah 70:4)

The *Zohar* (literally, “radiance”—the classic of Jewish mystical commentary on the Torah and the primary work of Kabbalah) provides an insight into the sweep of Yaakov’s vow. Yaakov is saying: “In the same way Elohim [God] will fulfill for me all these good promises, so I will draw toward Him from my region all those blessings and will *make Him the all-comprehensive uniting force.*” (*Zohar*, Bereshit 1:150b) (Our emphasis.)

What, precisely, does Yaakov seek to have comprehensively united?

Yaakov’s words and deeds seemingly reflect an understanding that the conditions of his life are partly in his own hands, his own responsibility, partly in the hands of his family and community, Am Yisrael (the Jewish people), and partly a matter of Divine providence. In the crisis he faced, or those we face, there was for him, as there can be for us, a recognition that the outcomes we seek to influence rise or fall according to whether we are living and acting together, united as one in a community, in ways that complement God’s creation.

Yet realistically it seems that acting together for the commonweal, united in a congregational community, requires that you love your neighbor as yourself (ואהבת את רעך כמוך), which on the face of it, given disparate interests and commonplace conflict in congregational life, is a seemingly unreasonable expectation. But the commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) on Genesis 50:17 teaches that we are *not* commanded to love our *neighbor* as ourselves; the *mitzvah* reads *v’ahavta l’reiacha kamocha* (ואהבת לרעך כמוך) (Leviticus 19:18)—that is, we are expected to love only that which *belongs to* our neighbor, “his health, well being, happiness, and success,” as if it were our own, regardless of our personal dislike or distaste for our neighbor.

By way of illustration, when Joseph’s brothers, who had sold him into slavery, related their father’s words to him after Yaakov’s death, they acknowledged that, given their betrayal, they no longer had the right to be loved as his brothers—but they appealed implicitly to his commitment to God, Torah, and Israel, that nevertheless they had “. . . the same mission and calling . . . [and were] fellows of the same covenant.” (Hirsch on Genesis 50:17)

How are we, in the light of Yaakov’s vows, to formulate our own understanding and approach to seeking Divine intervention?

The effect on us of vowing as Yaakov did is to say: If I am given an opportunity to shape the world in God’s image, so as to avoid or diminish the pain of loss in the future, I will fully give of myself to do so; I will also act to encourage and support others to do so communally, regardless of our past differences.

Certainly we are not personally culpable for all the misfortune that occurs in the world, unless of course we have caused it directly. But as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) said, “Few are guilty, but all are responsible.” We are responsible, able to respond, for the good fortune of others and ourselves. There is hardly a situation in which, had each of us in our community lived a more Torah-based (religiously observant) life, outcomes individually and communally would not have been substantially changed for the better, the pain of loss significantly diminished for one and all.

Yaakov understood prayer as a uniting force, that potentially it links the well-being of the individual with that of his or her family, community, and people, through their action together guided by God. It was his commitment as a spiritual leader, acting and promoting communal action in the image of God, that would sustain the social, economic, and political welfare of the people by ensuring the greatest possible access to God’s blessings.

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