

Focusing on Tefilla

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

Mrs. Michal Horowitz offers weekly classes and shiurim at many venues in her home community of the Five Towns, NY and the greater New York area. Additionally she is a speaker at Yeshiva University's Midreshet Yom Rishon and has been a featured speaker for the last three years at the RIETS Shavuot Yarchei Kallah Program.



PUTTING OUR HEARTS BACK INTO OUR PRAYERS

Miriam Peretz is, by now, a household name. Her son Uriel (1976-1998) fell in battle in the North with Hezbollah, and her son Eliraz (1978-2010) fell in the Gaza Strip in battle with Hamas.¹ Repeatedly bereaved, Miriam is a modern-day symbol of courage, faith, and hope, despite her staggering losses.

Miriam writes:

When they told me that Uriel had been killed, the first thought that went through my head was, "Too bad I wasn't there."

In my imagination, I saw myself going out on the ambush mission, standing in the line of soldiers. I'm a mother, I have good instincts. I would have shouted to Uriel, "Be careful of that rock! There are explosives there!" I also imagined Uriel turning around and asking, "Ima, what are you doing here?" and me answering, "Listen, Uriel, I don't know anything about the army, but I do know how to be a mother.

... When I was told about Eliraz, I reacted differently. I wanted to know whether in that moment he had thought of his children, if he had held their image

in his mind. I wanted to know the last thought that went through his head when he saw the flash, when his last breath left his body.

I'll never have the answers to those questions, but I have a feeling that Eliraz's last thought was of the Jewish people, that even in the last moment of his life, he was occupied with the great mission that stood before him, not with private thoughts. That's my feeling, but in his pants pocket we found drawings that his children made for him. He had taken them with him on the mission. In another pocket was a book of Tehillim.

When they brought me Eliraz'a tallit, I sniffed it. It smelled of the army, of the grease they use on rifles. I pictured Eliraz at the height of his holiness. That grease symbolized the struggle for our spirit and faith; the tallit that belonged to a combat soldier enfolded a book of Tehillim and a rifle.²

בראש השנה יכתובו וביום צום כפור יחתמו.
מי יחיה ומי ימות מי בקצו ומי לא בקצו מי
במים ומי באש ... ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה
מעבירין את רוע הגזרה

And on Rosh HaShana it will be written and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed, who will live and who will die, who in his time and who before his time, who by water and who by fire... and repentance, prayer and charity erase the evil decree.

More than any other time of the year, the Yomim Noraim remind us of the frailty of man and his seemingly absurd place in the cosmos. As we spend much of the month of Tishrei standing before the Creator and King, beseeching and pleading for our wants, needs and desires, we come face to face with the human condition. What is man if not a finite, limited, fragile being, flung into the chaos of this world, compelled by fate to navigate the turbulent waters of life?

My grandfather, Yitzchak Kaftan a'h, wrote in his Holocaust memoirs:

Yom Kippur, when we came from a hard day's work [in the Budzyn labor camp], we quickly went into the barracks so that Neila could still be davened with a minyan, yet for us was heaven closed. However, all of us together vigorously pleaded for help.³

Often forlorn, sometimes confused, facing fears and doubts, what anchors us to G-d in our daily, personal and national lives? In a word: tefillah, prayer. The movement of the lips and the yearnings of the soul. The tenet

of our faith, upon which our avodas Hashem rests.

Which behooves us to wonder: What gives finite man permission to plead with Infinite G-d? Man, who is here today and gone tomorrow, stands before the One Who embodies past-present-future,⁴ and pours out his innermost thoughts and desires, joys and fears.

That grease symbolized the struggle for our spirit and faith; the tallit that belonged to a combat soldier enfolded a book of Tehillim and a rifle.

R' Soloveitchik explains that:

Prayer is a vital necessity for the religious individual. He cannot conceal his thoughts and his feelings, his vacillations and his struggles, his yearnings and his wishes, his despair and his bitterness — in a word, the great wealth stored away in his religious consciousness — in the depths of his soul... Prayer is a necessity. Vital, vibrant religiosity cannot sustain itself without prayer. In sum, prayer is justified because it is impossible to exist without it.⁵

While it may seem preposterous for finite man to beseech, request and plead with Infinity, without prayer, the Rav teaches, man simply cannot exist. It is impossible for the stirrings of the soul, the passions of the heart, and the ideals of the mind to formulate and exist without prayer.

Tefillah, prayer, and the more colloquial verb “davening,” however,

are ambiguous terms. To what, exactly, do we refer when we say, “I have to daven,” “I need to pray” or “It’s time for tefillah”?

The reality is that tefillah is comprised of two distinct elements, which are interdependent, but not interchangeable, and neither component is dispensable. There is the law of prayer and the heart of prayer.

The order, zman, and structure of tefillah are time-bound, word-specific, and governed by the rules and regulations of Jewish law.

The heart, passion, and emotive experience of prayer are unique to each of us, changing from person to person and time to time.

R' Lord Jonathan Sacks writes:

There is tefillah and there is seder ha'tefillah: the act of prayer and the order of prayer, and they are two very different things. We can all relate to prayer in its most primal sense. We turn to G-d in high emotion — fear, joy, guilt, regret, hope, anxiety, or thanksgiving. Something deep within us feels moved to speak to that which is beyond us, to the Soul of the universe, the everlasting arms that hold us in their embrace. Such were the prayers of our ancestors in faith: Yaakov fearing his encounter with Esav, the Israelites as they crossed the divided Sea, Moshe begging G-d to forgive the people, Chanah pleading for a child. Maimonides sees this kind of spontaneous expression — specifically the prayers of the Patriarchs — as the historic and halakhic basis of prayer as such. It has no set times and no set text. It can be long: Moshe once prayed for forty days and forty nights. It can be short: Moshe's prayers for his sister to be cured of tzara'at was a mere five words, “Please G-d, heal her now.”

*Prayer in this sense is a signal of transcendence, an instinct that tells us that we are not alone... There is Someone there to Whom we can speak the single most important word in the entire lexicon of prayer: Atah, You. The poet laureate of this kind of prayer was King David, and to this day, Sefer Tehillim, the Book of Psalms, is its most powerful expression. Prayer is the redemption of solitude.*⁶

With proper guidance and incorporating the order of prayer into our daily routines, generally with training from a very young age, it becomes habitual — and not all that difficult — to fulfill the requirements of the law of prayer.

Our day follows some variation of the same basic pattern: Wake up. Wash up. Get dressed. Pack up for the day at school/work/home. Go to shul and/or daven at home. Get on with the day. Stop sometime before sunset for mincha. Eat dinner. Daven maariv. Hopefully, at some point during the day, we have made time for limud Torah as well.

Our three daily prayers are based on those established by our forefathers, as the Sages teach (*Brachos* 26b):

אברהם תקן תפלת שחרית שנא' (בראשית יט, כז) וישכם אברהם בבקר אל המקום אשר עמד שם ואין עמידה אלא תפלה ... יצחק תקן תפלת מנחה שנאמר (בראשית כד, סג) ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה לפנות ערב ואין שיחה אלא תפלה ... יעקב תקן תפלת ערבית שנאמר (בראשית כח, יא) ויפגע במקום וילן שם ואין פגיעה אלא תפלה.

Avraham instituted the morning prayer, as it is stated, "And Avraham rose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Hashem" (Gen.19:27), and standing means nothing other than prayer ... Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer, as it is stated: "And Isaac went out to converse in the field

toward evening" (Gen.24:63), and conversation means nothing other than prayer ... Yaakov instituted the evening prayer, as it is stated: "And he encountered the place and he slept there for the sun had set" (Gen.28:11). The word encounter means nothing other than prayer.

Hence, we daven Shachris in the morning, Mincha in the afternoon, and Maariv at night. As practicing, believing, observant Jews, the law and order of prayer fits nicely into our daily routine.

What, however, of the other aspect of tefillah, the heart of prayer?

If we are intellectually honest with ourselves (not always a comfortable, or comforting, experience) perhaps we would acknowledge that while many excel in fulfilling the law of prayer, far fewer among us excel in fulfilling the heart of prayer.

What are we davening for, if we utter the words by rote; if we make the minyan because we have to, and not necessarily because we acutely feel the need to. Can we discharge the obligation of prayer if we fulfill the law of prayer without the emotion of prayer?

Of her son, Moshe, who was critically injured while serving in the Israeli Air Force,⁷ Barbara Blum writes:

After physiotherapy, Alex (Moshe's father), with unending patience and love, would put Moshe's tefillin on him and recite the morning prayers. Moshe took his prayers very seriously. Since his vision was affected by his injury, he could not read the prayers from the siddur. Alex would recite the prayers aloud and Moshe would repeat them with his lips. If Moshe thought that Alex was praying too fast, he'd make kissing sounds and Alex would slow down. If he suspected

*that Alex had made a mistake or missed a word, he'd become very upset and would want to start the prayers from the beginning. Sometimes this would happen after half an hour of praying. We tried to convince Moshe that Hashem knows that we are mere humans who make mistakes and He forgives us. But most of the time this didn't satisfy him, and he would insist on praying from the beginning.*⁸

לאהבה את ה' אלהיכם ולעבדו בכל לבבכם (דברים יא, יג) איזו היא עבודה שהיא בלב הוי אומר זו תפלה.

For "To love Hashem your G-d and to serve Him with all your heart" (Devarim 11:3). Which service of G-d is performed in the heart? You must say this is prayer.

Taanis 2a

We are commanded to not only recite the words, but to think of their meaning; to not only stand at attention by rote, but stand in awe and reverence before G-d; to not only bow by habit but bend low out of immense thanks for all that we have; to not only "have" to pray but to understand that we need, and therefore, want to pray.

R' Soloveitchik movingly and powerfully teaches that:

The very essence of tefillah expresses itself in a romance rather than in disciplined action, in a great passionate yearning rather than a limited cold achievement, in a movement of the soul rather than performance of the lips, in an awareness rather than in action, in an inner longing rather than in a tangible performance, in silence rather than in loud speech... Certainly one who does not correlate the experience with an objective symbol, in this case the recital of words, is remiss in his duty. However, the external act is clearly but a side, a formal side, of the full state of mind. The latter turns away from the externals and from physical

efforts; the individual is captivated by the great vision of the supremely impressive and wondrous. The inner activity, free from reaching out for external accomplishment; the inward look which does not call out for outward deeds; the attention that goes entirely to the unseen and is indifferent to the outer show; in brief — the *avodah she'ba'lev* which ceremonial and decorum seem to hinder — this is the essence of prayer.⁹

Imagine — and in our day and age of technology, smartphones, tablets, social media, and the ever constant bombardment of virtual communication, sadly, it is not too hard to imagine — that we are attempting to hold an important and fundamental discussion with a child, a loved one, a student, a confidant, a world leader, while checking the news apps on our phones, a Facebook post, or the latest Twitter feed. Such a discussion is no discussion at all, for while we may physically be present and going through the motions, undeniably, our hearts and minds are elsewhere.

In regard to the action of prayer without proper intent, the Rambam writes (*Hilchos Tefilla* 4:15):

כוונת הלב כיצד כל תפלה שאינה בכוונה אינה תפלה ואם התפלל בלא כוונה חוזר ומתפלל בכוונה מצא דעתו משובשת ולבו טרוד אסור לו להתפלל עד שתתיישב דעתו לפיכך הבא מן הדרך והוא עיף או מיצר אסור לו להתפלל עד שתתיישב דעתו.

Concentration of the heart — how (is this fulfilled)? Any prayer (recited) without concentration is not prayer. And if he prayed without concentration, it must be recited again with concentration. If a person finds that his thoughts are confused and his mind is distracted, he may not pray until he has recovered composure of the mind. Hence, on returning from a journey, and he is weary

or distressed, it is forbidden to pray until his mind is composed.

We are taught from the youngest of ages that tefillah is an integral part of our daily lives, and this is good and well, for it helps establish prayer as the foundation of our faith and Divine service. And yet, it comes along with a caveat: Tefillah tends to become so routine that it is often practiced by unthinking rote.

Hence, it is not for naught that the Sages warn us:

רבי שמעון אומר, הוי זהיר בקריאת שמע [ובתפילה] וכשאתה מתפלל, אל תעש תפלתך קבע, אלא רחמים ותחנונים לפני המקום ברוך הוא שנאמר (יואל ב יג) כי חנון ורחום הוא ארך אפים ורב חסד ונחם על הרעה.

Rabbi Shimon says: Be careful in the reciting of Shema (and praying). When you pray, do not make your prayer fixed, rather prayers for mercy and supplication before the Omnipresent, blessed be He, as it says, "For He is gracious and merciful, long-suffering and full of kindness, and reconsiders regarding the evil."

Avos 2:13

Do we daven because we are obligated to do so, because it's another activity to check off on the daily "To Do" list, because I have been davening since kindergarten, and everyone does it... Are my prayers *kevah* — fixed and by rote?

R' Ovadia m'Bartenura (15th C. Italy) explains the Mishna as follows:

קבע - כאדם שיש עליו חובה דבר קבוע ואומר אימתי אפרוק מעלי חוב זה. אי נמי, קבע, כאדם שקבוע לו לקרוא פרק אחד פרשה אחת, שאומר אותה בקריאה בעלמא, ואינו אומרה בלשון תחנונים כאדם שמבקש רחמים:

Fixed: Like a person who has something fixed that he is obligated in and says, "When will I unload this obligation



Tefillah Insights: Simcha l'artzecha v'sason l'irecha — Happiness for Your land and Joy for Your City

Artzecha refers to the Land of Israel and *irecha* refers to Jerusalem. Why is Israel associated with *simcha* and Jerusalem with *sason*? R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein, *Baruch She'Amar, Tefillot* pg 248, suggests that the difference between *simcha* and *sason* is seen in the phrase from Kel Adon, which we recite on Shabbat morning: *semeichim b'tzeitam v'sasim b'vo'am* — they are happy when they depart and joyous when they arrive. *Simcha* seems to refer to the beginning of the process and *sason* refers to its completion. On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we ask God to bring *simcha* to the Land of Israel by gathering everyone from the exile. That is the beginning of the process of redemption, which culminates with the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash and which brings *sason* to Jerusalem.

Torah To Go Editors

from upon me?" Another explanation is "fixed" — like a person for whom it is fixed that he read a chapter and a section which he says only as a recitation and does not say in the language of supplications, as a person who is requesting mercy.

כי אל חנון ורחום הוא — רוצה בתחנונים,
ועל ידי התחנונים הוא מרחם מיד:

For He is gracious and merciful: He desires supplications, and through the supplications, He immediately has mercy.

Perhaps, if we understand and appreciate the experience of prayer, in addition to the order of prayer, we would find the boundless reward hidden within tefillah itself.

R' Soloveitchik teaches that:

Prayer begins as an obligatory, even compelled act, with rigid requirements of time, location and behavior. We are particularly aware of this during the winter or in inclement weather when we must venture out into the cold for minyan early in the morning and at night. However, as we progress in our relationship to prayer, we feel the rewards of intimate communion with G-d.¹⁰

כי כְּשֶׁמִּיד בְּנִתְּלֵתָּ קָשָׁה לְכַעַס וְנוֹחַ לְרַצוֹת
כִּי לֹא תִחַפֵּץ בְּמוֹת הַמֵּת כִּי אִם בְּשׁוּבוֹ מִדְּרָכָו
וְחַיָּה וְעַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ תִּתְחַכֵּה לוֹ אִם יָשׁוּב מִיָּד
תִּתְקַבֵּל ... אָדָם יִסְדּוּ מַעֲפָר וְסוּפוֹ לְעַפָּר ...
מְשׁוּל כְּחֶרֶס הַנִּשְׁפָּר כְּחֶצִיר יֵבֶשׁ וְכִצִּיץ נוֹבֵל
כִּצֵּל עוֹבֵר וְקַעֲנוֹ כֶּלֶה וְכִרְוֵחַ נוֹשֶׁבֶת וְכֶאֱבָק
פּוֹרֵחַ וְכֶחֱלוֹם יְעוּף.

*For Your Name signifies Your praise:
hard to anger and easy to appease,
for You do not wish the death of one
deserving death, but that he repent from
his way and live! Until the day of his*

death You await him; if he repents, You will accept him immediately... A man's origin is from the dust and his destiny is back to dust... he is likened to a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower, a passing shade, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, flying dust and a fleeting dream.¹¹

As we enter into a new year, there is no better time than the present — for if not now, when?¹² — to make a *kabalah al ha'asid* — a resolution to change for the better — in regard to our relationship with G-d through the vehicle of tefillah.

There are a plethora of halachos, seforim, and booklets to help us navigate the letter of the law in regard to tefillah. Let us tap into those resources so that the order and structure of our prayers are acceptable *al pi halacha*. We must recite the proper words, at the correct times, in the set order, so that we discharge our obligation of the law of prayer.

As for the heart of prayer and the emotive journey that goes along with *seder ha'Tefillah*, let us turn inward, to the feelings, joys and trepidations found within our very own hearts, so that we may fulfill, not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law of tefillah as well.

When we resolve to make small changes with lasting impact, we will find that our relationship with our Father, our King, will be boundlessly, infinitely and greatly enhanced, as we elevate and ennoble ourselves through the mode, medium, structure, order and passion of prayer.

Endnotes

1. In between the deaths of her two sons, Miriam's husband, Eliezer, died at the age of 56. Of her husband, Miriam says that he "died of a broken heart." (Heard by this author, in a talk Miriam gave at the Young Israel of Woodmere, Woodmere, NY, October 2014.)
2. Shir, Smadar. *The Story of Miriam Peretz: Miriam's Song*, p.313-314. Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2016.
3. Kaftan, Yitzchak. *Sefer Krashnik - Sefer Zikaron l'Kehilat Krashnik*. "In Seven Camps in Three Years," p. 421. Edited by David Sztokfisz. Tel Aviv, 1973.
4. cf. *Brachos* 33a.
5. Soloveitchik, R' J.B. *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, p.150. Edited by Shalom Carmy. Ktav Publishing House, Jersey City, 2003.
6. Mitoch Ha'Ohel, *From Within the Tent: The Weekday Prayers*, p. xiii-xiv. Edited by Feldman, R' Daniel Z. and Halpern, Dr. Stuart W. Maggid Books, Jerusalem, 2014, emphasis added.
7. Moshe Blum was wounded in April, 1990, at the age of twenty. He lived with his severe and debilitating injuries until his death in August 2003. May his memory be for a blessing.
8. Blum, Barbara. *Against All Odds*, p.120. Menucha Publishers, New York, 2016.
9. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph B. *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, p. 21. Edited by Shalom Carmy. Ktav Publishing House, Jersey City, 2003.
10. David, R' Avishai C. *Darosh Darah Yosef*, p. 224. Urim Publications, Jerusalem, 2011.
11. Text from the Mussaf prayers of the High Holidays.
12. *Avos* 1:14



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