

The Postmodern Piety of Rav Shagar **The Problems and Possibilities of Prayer**

1. *Sichot HaRan, 72*

You may be influenced by false motives and distracted by many outside thoughts when you pray. Ignore them completely. Do your part and say all the prayers in order, ignoring all disturbing thoughts. Do what you must and disregard these thoughts completely.

The Rebbe also said that these disturbing thoughts actually benefit our prayers. Without distracting thoughts, prayer would be impossible. Tremendous powers are always at work, attempting to denounce proper prayers. But distracting thoughts serve to disguise our prayers so that they are ignored by the Outside Forces. Then these forces do not denounce the prayers, and they are allowed to enter on high.

God knows the real truth. We may have improper motives or be distracted, but in the very depth of our heart, our intent is to God. God knows this. God sees this innermost desire. He sees through the outside and accepts the prayer in love. It is written, "Many thoughts are in a man's heart, but God's counsel is what stands" (Proverbs 19:21).

2. *Rav Yehudah Amital, Confronting the Holocaust*

On my first Yom Kippur after being liberated from a Nazi labor camp, I prayed with other survivors in a cramped cellar. I cannot fully describe the storm of emotion that I felt then, but I will try to reconstruct some of that feeling. I was young then. I had no children. My parents had been murdered along with most of the population of our town. Among the survivors in that small room, there were people who had lost their children, parents, spouses and siblings. They prayed, and I with them. Was their worship of God based on gratitude? Can a Jew who has lost his wife and children possibly serve God on the basis of recognition of His kindness? Can a Jew whose job was the removal of the charred remains of corpses from the crematoria of Auschwitz be capable of serving God on the basis of gratitude? No, not in any way, shape, or form! But where, then, does that leave us?

3. *Rav Shagar, Sheerit Emunah*

Moreover, if we return to the final scene in Rabbi Nachman's story, it seems that a very radical religious insight is hidden in it. The prayer, which in various midrashim is represented by the sword and is the symbol of the religious world in general, is answered because it becomes a joke! The fake prayer, the one made of wood and not iron, becomes the real prayer and this is because the border between reality and fiction disappears. Prayer is freed from the need for a factual grip on reality by becoming a joke, a laugh... In other words, the religious person discovers his disgrace, the fact of his lacking religious self, but he turns this disgrace itself into a joke, thus freeing himself from it. In this sense, the religious person is never what he really is, because he discovers that there is actually no such thing - really. The sword he's waving is fictional, it's made of wood. At this point comes the self-overcoming which is essentially a movement of renunciation: his wooden sword, the prayer that expresses his entire fake religious world, it becomes real. To be precise: we are not talking here about a ritualized and sterilized religious existence, like the behaviorist descriptions of the religious ritual, but one that generates what it is supposed to generate, that is - the prayer is answered in it.

4. *Rav Shagar, Pur Hu ha-Goral, 56*

God compelled Israel to accept the Torah because only through such compulsion could their acceptance take on a level of essential necessity not given to any renunciation... the compulsion spoken of here needs to be understood not as mere external duress, but rather in the psychological sense of inner necessity. The Jew is bound to his Jewishness in a compulsive fashion and cannot escape it.

5. Yishai Mevorach, Theology of Lack, 155-156

לְמִנְחָה לְדָוִד מִזְמוֹר אֲלֵהִי תְהִלָּתִי אֶל־תְּהַרְשׁ:
כִּי כִי רָשָׁע וּפִי־מְרִמָּה עָלַי פָּתְחוּ דְבָרוֹ אֵתִי לְשׁוֹן שִׁקָּר:
וְדִבְרֵי שִׁנְאָה סִבְבוּנִי וְהִלְתְּמוּנֵי חַגָּם:
תַּחַת־אֲהַבְתִּי יִשְׁטְנוּנֵי וְאֲנִי תַפְלָה:

For the leader. Of David. A psalm.
O God of my praise,
do not keep aloof,
for the wicked and the deceitful
open their mouth against me;
they speak to me with lying tongue.
They encircle me with words of hate;
they attack me without cause.
They answer my love with accusation
and I must stand judgment.

1.

I stand in prayer. I accept myself, the fact that prayer is placed as part of the horizon of my life. It is not faith in prayer that is found, in that it helps, in that it heals the sick - but prayer as an act, as much as I do. It occurs in my life as an expression of lips, as kneeling and experiencing, as lifting eyes and hands to the sky, as an appeal to the Lord of the world, as a supplication to God. When I say "I prayed for so-and-so's healing", I am not saying that I prayed because I believe in so-and-so's healing, nor because I prayed because I believe that my prayer will heal so-and-so, but I say that "I prayed for so-and-so's healing", that is what I did. I did not make a claim but reported an act.

2.

People pray. This is partly what they do; In a mincha prayer, at a street corner before it gets dark, in running for the bus-that-will-not-arrive-in-time, in the swaying of the body, in closing one's eyes, in reciting psalms, in saying "By God's help", in the desperate sigh "Oh God"...

6.

Prayer is part of the body and not part of the soul or spirit. This is the meaning of the expression "I am prayer," in different Chassidic derashot: the act of tefillah is inscribed on the subject. Prayer is the excess of one's being. So teaches Rav Zadok... If so, the source of prayer is not part of a person—"It is impossible to pray unless God opens his lips in prayer." Therefore it is foreign to a person but still inscribed on his "I". "Because a person is the dwelling place of his glory."... This means that the foreign divine disturbance—prayer—is part of the body.

6. Shiurim B'Gemara, Berachot, vol. 2, 230-231

If a person wants to pray in a serious manner, they must give themselves time. It is impossible to pray under pressure. So it was for the earlier chassidim, who would wait an hour before prayer. Prayer in the way we are speaking about it is avodah, and like in any area, it will be fruitful only if one has time. If one has a sense of calm and inner quiet. A person must enter a situation of calm, and to focus, and not to establish for themselves a position. They should not ask themselves whether what they say is correct or incorrect; if you have kavannah or not. One should only pay attention to what one says, to the meaning of the words... The point is that that you are not the one who does it. As the Magid says, "*ratzon yireav yaaseh*," the will is also fixed by God.