

"A PRAYER MUST HAVE WINGS"

Prayer is not only one of the most important features of religious life, but is its most characteristic activity. It is the natural expression of the soul. Rabbi Kook speaks of ha-tefillah ha-matmedet shel ha-neshamah, the soul constantly at prayer. It is the symbol, the tag, the identification mark of religiousness. And of all the year, *when we declare that this prayer is the most prayerful*, I invite you with me, therefore, in an exploration of this *characteristic* unique Religious experience. *well done*

I fear that after this day is done, there *may* be something amiss -- not only today, but at the end of every period of prayer, whether that be often or seldom. We will, of course, feel a sense of respect, perhaps even of achievement, certainly a bit of relief. But with it, for so many of us, will *come* be a feeling of emptiness and a sense of disappointment. We feel instinctively, so often, that there is so much to be found in our Prayerbook, and yet we emerge from it with so little. We wonder why we do not get from it as much as others do, as much as our parents or grandparents did. Well, what is it that is wrong? What is missing? Where does the fault lie?

I think
allow me to
I will tell you what is wrong. There is nothing wrong with our prayers. They are as valid and meaningful today as they ever were. There is something wrong with us. We moderns have largely forgotten how to pray -- in any language. Our prayers and our services have everything,

seemingly: dignity, decorum, smoothness, precision, voice, ceremony. All that is good and important and necessary. *But the one thing that counts*

that the worshiper is expected to bring to his worship
so very many
most, the most important of all, is all too often missing: Life. All too often in American synagogues *the* our praying is cold and stiff; *the* our service uninspired; *the* our worship lifeless. Of course we must insist upon decorum and dignity. Without them the whole sanctity of the synagogue is destroyed.

yet it is our honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that it is indeed we do take experience some look in our praying, then what a meaning is there thing that counts most in later prayer! Life

⊗

^{and all idle prattle}
The noise of the market-place must be shut out of the synagogue, and the dignity of man and Torah enhanced. But decorum and dignity must never become substitutes for life -- rather, they must enhance it, ensure it, prepare for its expression.

It is told of the Besht, the saintly founder of the Hassidic movement, that he was traveling with a group of his admirers (Hassidim) one afternoon when the time came for praying ^{and} the afternoon services. They stopped at a nearby town and headed for the synagogue. When they were about to enter this beautiful and almost completely empty edifice, they noticed that the Besht stopped and would not cross the threshold. When they asked him to explain, he said that he could not enter because the "shul" was too crowded. The Hassidim looked at each other with bewilderment: an empty synagogue and he will not enter because it is "crowded". When the holy Besht noticed their puzzlement, he explained: yes, too crowded -- I feel that the whole room is filled with prayers, so full of them that I cannot get in, and they are the prayers that did not go up to Heaven because they had no wings.

That, friends, is the burden of my remarks to you this morning: the regretful observation that ^{too many of us} ~~we~~ American Jews have clipped the wings off our prayers. We have reduced the soaring soul of our prayers to dead-weight verbiage. We have made the adventure of the spirit -- for that is what prayer should be -- the dry recitation of ancient poetry. An English poet (James Montgomery) once said that prayer is "The motion of a hidden fire/ That trembles in the breast./ Prayer is the burden of a sigh,/ The falling of a tear,/ The upward glancing of an eye/ When none but G-d is near." Can we say that of our praying? When there is no fire, no trembling, no sigh, no tear, no upward glance, not even a sure feeling of the nearness of G-d? When

in too many Am. synag.

there is no surprise, no adventure, no sudden outburst of devotion? No, the fire has gone out of our worship. We have allowed the wings of our prayer to atrophy from disuse. Our prayers are, unfortunately, grounded.

American

We modern Jews often excuse our lack of observance by stoutly maintaining that we at least have a "good heart." Very well, then, let us prove the goodness and let us use the heart! The very name for Prayer in the language of Judaism is Avodah She'ba'leiv -- the service or sacrifice of the heart.

Heart is, indeed, the heart of prayer! We must put our hearts and our souls into our prayers. We must cast off our silly inhibitions and shyness and put life and love and feeling into every word. Praying must be a service of joy and rapture; in the words of the Psalmist, "Serve the Lord with rejoicing."

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This warmth, this heartiness, this feeling is called Kavanah. It is that which is the essence of the life of a prayer, and the only thing which can revive praying for us moderns as a meaningful and thrilling experience. Prayer without Kavanah, a ~~medieval~~ ^{ancient} saying goes, is like a body without a soul. It is not our prayers that need reviving; it is we who pray who must be revived. And that can be done only through Kavanah, only by putting wings on our prayers.

What, exactly, then, is Kavanah? It is inner participation, inner devotion, warmth, spontaneity, inwardness, the outpouring of the heart over the walls of shyness and bashfulness, of fright and social inhibitions which dam it up with such terrible effectiveness. Kavanah in prayer must be like the symphony of Beethoven's upon which the famed composer himself wrote, "to be played from the heart to the heart." Kavanah means not only to read the words of the Siddur -- but to answer them. "Though smooth be the ^thearless prayer, no ear in Heaven will mind it; And the finest phrase falls dead, if there be no feeling behind it." (Ella Wheeler Wilcox). That feeling is Kavanah. Kavanah is enthusiasm -- and remember that the word

enthusiasm is composed of two Greek words -- en and theos -- which means "in G-d." Kavanah, therefore, is the thrill of being close to G-d, immersed in G-dliness. ^{It} ~~Kavanah~~ ^{is} that which can make a King David say Ani Tefillah -- "I am prayer" -- that is, so bound up and attached to the words uttered, that you merge with prayer itself and become as one. In short, to return to the Besht's wise saying, to use Kavanah means to put wings on your prayers. It is not enough for a Prayer to be like a penguin, which is clean, formal and dignified -- but cannot get off the ground. It must grow wings and soar like an eagle.

Well, then, someone here might be inclined to say, granted that Kavanah is the life and soul of prayer, but how does one go about finding that enthusiasm and developing that inspiration if he doesn't just have it naturally and cannot find it in the society in which we live? How do you grow wings on your prayers? A good and legitimate question. And let us eliminate certain solutions first: The answer is not by organ accompaniment, because we do not believe in Prayer by Machine. Not by having the Rabbi intone prayers for ^{The congregation} you, because we do not believe in Prayer by Proxy. Not by just relaxing and listening to the Cantor's singing, because we do not believe in Prayer by Operatics. Certainly not by indulging in that unfortunate habit of whispering and disgraceful disorderliness that all too often is tolerated ⁱⁿ by many Orthodox synagogues, ^{that is violation of Halakhah, and} for we do not mistake clamoring for ^{Kavanah} devotion. How then? I think we can use ~~one of~~ three ways to find and exercise that Kavanah.

First of the aids in acquiring Kavanah is: awareness of Prayer as Privilege. By "Prayer as Privilege" I do not mean that when we are in some kind of trouble we are privileged in that we can turn to G-d for help. ^{relief} ~~See 4(a)~~

~~The second consideration in the quest for Kavanah is the exercise of Selflessness in Prayer. Although the approach to G-d is frequently -- or~~

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I mean, rather, that the very fact that man can pray, that he may pray --
and encroach upon the presence of G-d ⁻⁻ is an amazing piece of good fortune
for ^{us} him. The great Rabbi Bunam of Pzysha asked: why did G-d ^{in the Genesis story,} put such a
strange curse upon the serpent, condemning it to eat dust all its life? Was
this not a blessing rather than a curse, for it can find its food every
place and every time? And he answered: G-d told Adam that he must eat his
bread by the sweat of his brow, and if he has no bread he can pray to G-d
for help. To Eve G-d said that she was to bear children in pain, and if
her pain is great she can pray to G-d to ease it. Thus both are still
bound to G-d and can find a way ^{back} to Him. But to the serpent, source of ^{evil,}
G-d gave everything it requires, so that it might never have the occasion
to turn to Him.

When we thus regard prayer -- even prayer for the fulfillment of our
needs -- as a privilege, as a way to G-d Whom we might otherwise ignore
all our lives, our prayer is filled with Kavanah. The first technique
for putting wings on our prayers is to appreciate that the need, the
occasion, the ability and the opportunity to pray are a blessing, an
aspect and expression of our humanity and closeness to the Creator rather
than a serpentine distance from Him.

The second consideration in the quest for Kavanah is the exercise of
Selflessness in Prayer. Although the approach to G-d is frequently -- or

usually -- made through selfish motives, the content and goal of prayer is just the opposite. True worship is the forgetting of the self. I am hungry and want to eat; cold and want clothing; frightened and want security; rejected and want love -- these may be the factors that lead us to pray~~er~~, they may be some of the things we mention in prayer. But they are not the ~~only~~ substance of prayer. ~~The essence of prayer is not begging alone; far more than that, it is the sheer thrill and wonder, the simple and naive marvel of standing before G-d. It is the losing of our self-consciousness, and the complete submergence of the self in the presence of the King of Kings. And what choice have we but to exercise Kavanah when we realize that we are being overwhelmed with holiness and purity -- the outer fringes of His presence; ~~that~~ that we are being uplifted from transience to eternity; that we suddenly find ourselves in a new and higher world; that this moment of true prayer is the essence of immortality, that it will live forever.~~

I have been using the words "pray^{ing}" and "to pray" often in this talk. Yet I must confess the words are unfamiliar and come strange to my lips. I am much more at home with the Yiddish "to daven." And that is not only because of pleasant childhood associations, but because the word itself conveys more of this marvelous and wonderful feeling of G-dliness than does the word "pray." As a matter of fact, ^{some} students of language ~~have often wondered about the origin of the word "daven," and some of them suggest that it comes from the French word devant which means "in front of."~~ When one "davens" he bypasses mere petition, ^{and} he reaches the level of dissolution of his ego before the G-d he addresses. Da Lifnei Mi Ata Omed, "Know before Whom you stand," has graced ~~the front of many a pulpit~~ ^{an Ark.} And it says: when you pray, my friend, you "daven"; you are completely and wholly before and in the presence of Almighty G-d. "Davenning" is praying with wings.

That is why, incidentally, the Cantor in our Traditional synagogues does

not face the congregation but the Ark. When a cantor faces the congregation, they are his audience, and his chants are the arias of a vocal artist waiting for approval and applause. When he faces the Holy Ark, G-d is his audience, and his chants form "davenning," and he awaits the approval of Him to Whom all prayers are addressed. Then and only then can his prayers have wings. That holds true for each of us who prays. We must remember that a synagogue is a House of Prayer, and that coming to it and praying in it is appearing before G-d. At such a time man stands stripped bare before his Maker, naked of all his pretenses. What should guide him at that time, in this one domain which should remain free of the superficialities of our age, is not his esthetic taste, not his social status, not his financial attainments, not how to pray with the "right crowd," not what his friends think of his choice of synagogue -- but solely Kavanah -- inner depth, the thoughts of his heart as they take wing to G-d. } Only by being selfless in Prayer can men and women who pray learn to fulfill themselves, ^{to reach the inner depths of K,} and rise to their full stature as children of G-d. }

Third and last of the methods we can suggest for attaining Kavanah is by referring to the Associations of Prayer. The words we utter were not written yesterday by some Bohemian poet in a religious mood. They are the distilled dew-drops of the religious experience of ages. They are laden with history, and therefore from the associations of these words we can draw a wealth of inspiration so that, in the words of Beethoven, they can be played from the heart to the heart. ^{when we} ~~We~~ must remember how these words were hallowed by generations of pious men and women, the greatness and genius of their composers, the spiritual response they evoked from others who preceded us and who recited the same words, ^{then we} ~~we~~ can draw inspiration from inspiration, Kavanah from Kavanah. When we recite the Shma, ^e ~~for instance~~, we can acquire Kavanah if we recall that they were the last words spoken to the dying

^{why}
Patriarch Jacob, the last promise of his children to continue to serve His G-d. They were spoken by Moses as ~~he~~^{he} prepared his people for the conquest of Canaan, which he knew he would never live to see. They were studied by philosophers, explained by mystics, and uttered by martyrs as they went down in glory. They were offered up to G-d as a simple, angelic, warm prayer of some Jewish child dying of the plague in Middle Age France. Wise men and ordinary people like ourselves found love in them, drew strength from them, put life into them, and gave their lives for them. These associations, the very sound of the words, therefore, can ignite the spark of Kavanah and inspiration which we cannot find in ourselves and in our society. Each word has a personality ^{and character} and history ^{all} of its own, and the associations we find in them can make them soar as we pronounce them. Professor Heschel put it very well when he said that "it is more inspiring to let the heart echo the music of the ages than to play upon the broken flutes of our own hearts." That is why, incidentally, we Orthodox Jews are so reluctant to cut and change and wreak havoc with our traditional Siddur. Besides the fact that the prayers are as relevant and meaningful today as the day they were written, the fact is that they carry in them the sentiment and sighs of centuries, the ^{untold} tears and ^{untold} joy of generations. The Siddur is the inner history of the eternal Jew, and its words are the repository of his spirit.

~~To summarize, then,~~ ^{that we shall have acquired by} the three ways of acquiring this Kavanah are by recognizing that Prayer is a Privilege; by ^{selflessly} submitting to the Wonder of Prayer; and by the recollections and Associations of the Prayers. *

The call of the Shofar, according to Maimonides, is a challenge to wake up from our lethargy. May we, as we now hear the sound of the Shofar, accept that challenge ^{with fortitude and resolve to} make our prayer purposeful, our devotion meaningful, our worship filled with Kavanah -- awareness and consciousness and sensitivity.

* It is only if we add to these the element of constant practice & training, we shall have enjoyed the fullness of prayer with ^{without which Kavanah is impossible to attain} the most exalted & meaningful religious experience in the universe.

Shofar is known as שופר - and differentiated sound, the symbol of ~~holy~~
emotion for holy, for lofty, to be expressed in mere words and syllables. ~~So~~
~~Now, even more, may Kavanah so fill our beings that mere words prove inadequate;~~
that the unexpressed adoration, the unarticulated love and the ^{irrespressible} unspoken emotion
within us take take wing with the tekiot of the Shofar and ^{cause our prayers to} soar before the
Heavenly Throne, eliciting from G-d the verdict of Berakhah, Chayyim, and
Sholom.

of Kavanah

Shofar is thus both the symbol of
+ inspiration for this inner
experience of Kavanah. As we
rise for Shema, may

4.55

Chaim
evolving