GOD HEAR OUR PRAYERS:

A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSFORMATIONAL STRENGTH OF PRAYER

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
REQUIREMENTS FOR ORDINATION

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
GRADUATE RABBINICAL PROGRAM
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

MARCH 15, 2012
ADVISOR: DR. NORMAN J. COHEN

INTRODUCTION

A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING PRAYER

This teaches that the ministering angels had closed up the windows of the firmament to prevent his prayer reaching heaven, but what did God do? He broke through the firmament beneath His Throne of Glory and received his prayer.

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:20

מלמד שהיו מלאכי השרת מסתמין את חלונות של רקיע שלא תעלה תפלתו לשמים
מה עשה הקב"ה חתר את הרקיע מתחת כסא הכבוד וקיבל את תפלתו

A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING PRAYER

This work was inspired by the notion that we can better understand the import, the dynamics, and the reality of prayer in the twenty-first century through an intensive study of prayer in the Bible and in the Rabbinic Literature. It explores how the notion of prayer has been communicated to the Jewish people through our sacred texts. It is the goal of this Thesis that by studying our texts we might come to a clearer understanding of our own prayers. Why do we pray? What is the nature of our prayers? What of ourselves and of our understanding of God do we bring to our own moments of prayer? It is clear that although our practices and our assumptions may have changed over the millennia, Divine and human natures have not. It is our hope that through this study of our sacred texts and the notions of prayer therein, we can begin to better comprehend the reality and the potential of our own relationships with the Divine.

Each of us has a singular relationship with God. Just as no two human beings are alike, so, too, must the relationship with the Divine be unique. Contemporary philosopher Carol Ochs teaches that decisions in our lives might be viewed as binary, we would ask, "does this action bring me closer or farther away from the Divine?"[1] If we accept that prayer is one mechanism by way by which we access God and bring ourselves closer to the Divine, then prayer may be seen to play a crucial role in the development of our spiritual lives. There are of course an infinite number other modes of access, study, too, plays a significant role for many in pursuit of this entrée.

This thesis ultimately looks at four significant narratives in the Bible in which prayer is a major part and then through intensive study considers how the Rabbis have addressed these

[1] Professor Carol Ochs, Class Notes Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, *Philosophy of Spiritual Guidance*, 2002.

moments in the *midrashic* and talmudic works. These aggadic sources help us to interpret and to appreciate the nuance in the biblical text. Marc Bregman wrote in his essay, *Isaak Heinemannn's Classic Study of Aggadah and Midrash*, "For the Rabbis the Bible is a trans-temporal verity. It tells not only of its own historical time, but relates directly to the present."[2] The Rabbis' writings help us to better understand how they might indeed influence our own reality. An attempt has then been made to mine these Biblical and Rabbinic texts in order to better understand what they can teach us as we today attempt to meet the Divine in prayer.

A comprehensive consideration of prayer must by definition take a lifetime. Our developing relationship with the Divine, like any true relationship is ever-changing. Relationships must be nurtured and must continue to develop over time lest they become atrophied. Although it was not a part of our original hypothesis, we ultimately ordered our study to reflect the reality that human development and maturity both inform and transform our relationship with the Divine. In our work, we first look at Isaac's prayer for his wife's fertility, and conclude with Moses' prayers at the end of his life. Between these two bookends, we analyze Hannah's transformative prayers around conception, her petitions, and her prayers of praise and thanksgiving. In addition, we pay close attention to humanity's prayers to God from the depths. In God's response to these prayers from the depths, God instructs the people to act. Each of these paradigms helps us to better understand a different aspect of the human/Divine relationship. Between the miracles of our births and the reality of our deaths, each of us must take responsibility for our lives through our choices and the actions of our limbs, and the meditations and prayers of our hearts.[3]

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[2] Marc Bregman, Isaak Heinemann's Classic Study of Aggadah and Midrash, Unpublished Correction Copy.
[3] Jacob S. Haigh identified the essence of personal responsibility as data point on the continuum of life.

METHODOLOGY

Beginning a project of this scope is daunting. Trying to decide where to begin was almost paralyzing. We know that the entire Bible reflects man's interaction with God and that many, many prayers may be found within its words. Therefore this was in effect an exercise in narrowing; in sifting, like the smelting of silver, or gold, and then parsing through the material to determine the best place from which to extract the deepest understanding of prayer.[4] The process began with a close reading of the Bible, seeking to determine the most concentrated Biblical prayer narratives. The initial study reviewed nearly twenty of these moments. Like any creative process, this work was in effect revelatory, with focused principles eminating from the extended research.

We analyzed the moments in the Bible where we observe prayer and then turned to the Rabbis to help to explicate their significance. The work is not exhaustive, but serves to introduce us to certain conceptual issues around the nature of prayer. With the assistance of the Bar Ilan University Online Responsa Project resources, a cross search of all the *aggadic midrashim* and Talmudic references relevant to these narratives were explored. On a parallel track, we looked at the nearly two dozen expressions for prayer found in the Bible and using concordance materials, attempted to isolate and understand these various linguistic markers which began to coalesce meaning around certain specific verbs.

There were four verbs in particular that seemed to present themselves with a great concentration of both narrative relevance and expansive rabbinic textual depth. It was these four verbs: pleading (*atr*); praying (*pll*); crying out (*tza'ak*) and seeking grace (*ve'etchanan*),

[4] Proverbs 17:3.

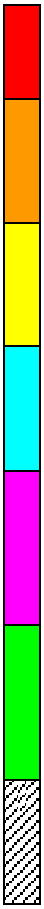
that were used as the primary focal points for our research. Aware of the variegated nature of prayer in the Bible, this work focused on these four paradigmatic approaches to communicating with the Divine. In addition to the four verbs considered in our study, there are numerous other linguistic markers for prayer in the Bible, which clustered around the focused four.

THE MANY WORDS FOR PRAYER

As they have done for many thematic issues, the Rabbis have developed for us a list of prayer words. The Rabbis often present enumeration lists pertaining to a specific leitmotif. There are, for example, the Ten Trials of Abraham, the ten things created at twilight of the sixth day of Creation, the seven things created before the creation of the world, and in relation to this work, the ten words for prayer. These lists are often repeated in different *midrashim*, handed down from teacher to disciple and incorporated with slight variations throughout aggadic literature. Therefore, the lists change over time, but in general reflect a consistency of thinking on the topic. These amalgamations, like all aspects of concordance work, help to communicate the Rabbis' understanding of the relationship between the words and relevant themes. It is in effect a rabbinic concordance of relevant narratives associated with a specific theme. The Jewish Encyclopedia also offers us a list of prayer words found in the Bible. Both the rabbinic and the more modern lists reflect the issues of their day and offer biblical references to situate more fully the words under consideration.

BIBLICAL PRAYER WORD REFERENCES

Key



Deuteronomy *Rabbah*	*Yalkut shemoni*	Encylcopedia *Judaica*
n/a	Go up/ Ascend (*vta'al*)	n/a
Cry for Help (*shava*)	n/a	same
Cry out (*tza'ak*)	same	same
Groan/Groaning (*na'aka*)	n/a	n/a
Crying Out (*Rina*)	same	n/a
Encouter (*Pagiya*)	same	same
In adversity (*b'tzor*)	same	n/a
Call (*kara*)	same	same
Fall (*nifal*)	same	n/a
Intervene / Interpose (*pll*)	same	n/a
n/a	Pray supplicate (*atar*)	n/a
n/a	Stand (*amad*)	n/a
n/a	n/a	To seek the face of God (*biqqesh Penei*)
n/a	n/a	To inquire (*sha'al*)
n/a	n/a	To lift up (*nasa*)
n/a	n/a	Pour heart out (*shafack lev*)
n/a	n/a	Complaint (*Siah*)

A close study has been made of the word lists found in Deuteronomy *Rabbah*[5] and the *Yalkut Shimoni*[6] as well as an analysis of the related biblical references. It is not surprising that we have observed that the words generally cluster around certain themes. Prayers of pleading and entreating formed the basis of our first chapter which considers

[5] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 2:1.
[6] Yalkut Shemoni *811*

Isaac's pleading (*atr*) for Rebekkah. The petitionary, judgment-seeking nature of prayer (*pll*) found in all lists is addressed in Chapter Two. The third category of words align around the concept of crying out (*tza'ak*). A number of modifying terms, with surprisingly consistent intentions were highlighted, including to cry out (*shiva*);[7] to groan, (*na'akatam- literally "their groans"*);[8] crying in distress (*b'tzar ekra);*[9] and even the ringing cry of prayer (*rina*).[10]

All of these modify the guttural, nearly unconscious sense of crying out to God from the depth of pain or sorrow addressed in Chapter Three. In all of the lists considered, the Rabbis recognize the power of the petition for grace (*ve'etchanan*),[11] with some offering synonyms including, 'implored' (*va'yichal)*[12] and throwing of self before the Lord (*nfl).*[13] This petition for grace will be addressed in Chapter Four.

The final example (throwing of self before the Lord) also is linked to a cluster of verbs that represent the physical or metaphorical choreography of prayer; as above, throwing oneself before the Lord(*nfl*);[14] lifting up one's prayers (*nasa*);[15] standing before the Divine in prayer (*amod*);[16] sending up cries to heaven (*ta'al shavat*);[17] and perhaps in this context we might consider the literal word to call (*kara*) to God.[18] There is also a strong biblical presence of people raising their hands in prayer (*lifros kapayim*). This term was not, however, included by the Rabbis in any of these sources.

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[7] Psalms 72:12.
[8] Exodus 2:24.
[9] 2 Samuel 22:7.
[10] Jeremiah 11:14.
[11] Deuteronomy 3:23.
[12] Exodus 32:1.
[13] Deuteronomy 19:18.
[14] Deuteronomy 9:25.
[15] Jeremiah 7:16.
[16] 1 Kings 8:55.
[17] Exodus 2:23.
[18] Psalms 18:7.

Interestingly, as you note from the comparative chart, the Encyclopedia Judaica,[19] a modern rather than a rabbinic source, introduces another constellation of words that seem to reflect a more modern, rationale and psychologically aware approach to prayer. The narratives of the Bible seem to address many of the more psychological issues, yet the Rabbis do not seem to highlight these particular verbs in their representations of prayer. These include: seeking God (*dorash),*[20] making inquires (*sha'a*l)[21] and seeking the face of God, (*bikesh pani).*[22] Although these verbs have not been explicitly highlighted by the early Rabbis many of these critically important issues have been addressed by the Rabbis and in the work that follows. These issues of knowing God and seeking God's face and God's Presence certainly speak to the essential questions of humanity's desire to 'know' God. Our prayers are often full of this particular yearning. The research for this work surveyed a broad selection of terms in relation to biblical narrative prayer. The thesis below has concentrated on four of the more significant linguistic and narrative markers.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

When we consider the essence of prayer, we understand that there are an infinite number of ways to reach the Divine. The first step in designing this thesis was to search the Bible in an attempt to identify the moments in the narrative in which we find instances of prayer, when our forbearers reached out to God. This exercise was nearly unmanageable in its scope. So much of the Bible reflects the human dialogue with God: humanity crying to

[19] Encyclopedia Judaica, New 2nd ed., s.v. "Prayer."
[20] Amos 5:4.
[21] Psalm 105:40.
[22] Hosea 5:15.

God, humanity praising God, and humanity thanking God. The breadth of material was nearly overwhelming. In an attempt to narrow the focus, the Psalms were excluded from the initial study design, and we concentrated on the narratives in the Torah. Hannah's prayers in the first book of Samuel were also considered due to the significant weight attributed to this narrative in the Talmud.

In gathering the Rabbinic writings around the identified narratives, a number of themes began to emerge. Four of these themes are presented to you in the chapters that follow. The first is the notion of appealing to God, entreating God with the expectation that God's will might be overturned, as we find in Isaac's pleas regarding his wife's infertility.[23] The second is Hannah's prayer for her own fertility, the presentation of her case before God and her songs of praise following the birth of their child, and their connection to the emergence of prayer as a structured and conscious action.[24] We then turned to the moments in the Bible when we hear individuals or the people, as a whole crying out to God, and God's challenge, *Why do they cry to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward*.[25] Humanity often cries out to God from the heart, from the place of deepest and darkest pain. The force of this guttural, nearly subconscious act and the need for human action in the actualization of life is explored in the third chapter of this Thesis.

The fourth chapter focuses on Moses' prayers near the end of his life, and presents a different framework. Through an in-depth study of these texts, a unifying principle began to emerge; there is in fact a clear and significant distinction to be drawn between the first three sections and the final unit of study. In the first three chapters, the underlying assumption is

[23] Genesis 25:21.
[24] 1 Samuel 1:10.
[25] Exodus 14:15. All English translations are drawn from the JPS Hebrew English Tanakh (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999).

that God will hear our prayers, consider our case and on the basis of our merit or the merit of the evidence presented, accept or reject our prayers. The first three thematic studies take as their primary premise the understanding that God's countenance is moveable, that God has a mind or a heart that can be influenced by human action. We learn in these chapters that the Rabbis believed that God's perspective or position on a certain matter might be altered through our prayers. The Rabbis believed that God is merciful; and that God responds to our prayers.

In the fourth chapter, we find a uniquely different premise. Moses' beseeching of God at the time of his death is used as the focal point for the exploration of grace as the true nature of God's response to humanity.[26] Here, Moses' prayers and the rabbinic writings explicating this primary text, help us begin to comprehend that God's answering our prayers may never be understood as anything more or less than an act of grace on the part of the Divine. Moses begins his prayers with the words of beseeching, seeking only grace from God. Clearly as human beings we are responsible for our own lives. It is crucial that we take all the gifts that we are granted and use them to live our lives to the fullest and greatest extent possible. However, we learn from the petition of grace (*ve'etchanan*) of Moses, that our destiny, our fate, the ultimate course of our lives is dependent quite literally on this grace, on this gift; on this granting by God. The historical rubrics of reward and punishment are decoupled in this reframing and the notions of merit refined as we consider the ultimate force of God's grace.

There are three major components of Jewish prayer; praise, petition and thanksgiving. It became quite clear in the initial stages of this research that this work would focus most primarily on the petitionary aspects of prayer. This was initially understood to be the result

[26] Deuteronomy 3:23.

of the decision to exclude the Psalms from the body of this work in order to focus exclusively on the narratives in the Torah. The Psalms and the *midrashim* around them clearly address much of our tradition's prayers of praise and thanksgiving. However, through this work an interesting hypothesis was established regarding the relationship between these three modes of prayer.

It was surprising that the only word offered by the Rabbis in these lists of prayer words that might reflect the essence of thanksgiving or praise is the word for 'ringing cry' (*rina*.) The primary text offered reflects the petitionary nature of this word, but there is the potential for an alternative understanding of the term to mean joy.[27] Interestingly, this is the only phrase suggested by the Rabbis that might be used to connect to the aspects of praise and thanksgiving; the non-petitionary aspects of the prayer modality. Our understanding regarding this relationship and the other areas requiring further investigation are explored in the Conclusion.

It is with the sense of the greatest of gratitude to Rabbi Norman Cohen, Ph. D. that I am submitting this work. His guidance both in crafting this study and in effect shepherding my rabbinic studies was unparalleled. Without his unwavering support I might never have gotten to Jerusalem, might never have entered the College-Institute and might never have had the opportunity to complete this work. Special thanks as well to Henry Resnik whose support and guidance has shepherded generations of rabbinical students through the college. The work is dedicated to the memory of Rabbi A.S. Dreyfus *z'l.* Who retaught me the *aleph bet* and practically everything else that I might need to know to become a rabbi, and to my family without whose incredible love and support I never would have reached this point. Rabbi Dreyfus and Dr. Cohen (as well as so many of my beloved teachers) believed in my

[27] Jeremiah 7:16.

rabbinate before there was one even to believe in. It is through this phenomenal journey, through their teachings and through the ever-present voice of Dr. Carol Ochs that I learned that our truest appreciation must always accrue to Adonai, without whose gifts none of us would even be here.

22 Adar 5772

CHAPTER 1

THE ENTREATING AND THE ENTREATED

From here (we learn) that the Holy One Blessed be He, prays. What does He pray? Rav Zutra bar Toviyah said in the name of Rav: May it be My will that My mercy conquer my anger, and that my mercy overcome My attributes, and that I behave towards My children with the attribute of mercy and that for their sake I go beyond the boundary of judgment.

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a

מכאן שהקדוש ברוך הוא מתפלל מאי מצלי אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב
יהי רצון מלפני שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי ויגולו רחמי על מדותי ואתנהג עם בני
במדת רחמים ואכנס להם לפנים משורת הדין

THE ENTREATING AND THE ENTREATED

Our initial discussion will address the moment in the Bible when Isaac prays to God on behalf of his wife Rebekkah, who has not been able to conceive.[28] This prayer is petitionary in nature and the word "pleaded" (*atr*) is the referential verb. Isaac, having reconstructed his life after the death of his mother and his own brush with death at the hands of his father, has married Rebekkah. Isaac pleads (*atr*) with *Adonai* on behalf of his wife because she is barren. *Adonai* responds (*va ye'ater*) to his plea and Isaac's wife Rebekkah conceived (*va tahar*). The *pshat* involves a fairly straightforward interaction. A man's wife has a problem, he pleads to God on her behalf, his prayer is fulfilled, her womb is filled and she becomes pregnant. However, the import and reality of this interaction are far more complex. As is its role in the tradition, the *midrash* expands on this premise and helps us to see past the simplicity of the text, encouraging us to consider a fuller understanding of what has occurred. Although the text is neither theologically nor philosophically explicit, it connotes to us a greater understanding of what has transpired.

In this text, the Hebrew root used to express Isaac's plea is (*atr*) which means to plead or to ask God to provide or to do something that in effect changes the outcome and reality of one's life. It is, in essence, an archetype of a petitionary prayer. From a purely grammatical perspective, we can look at the definitions of the trilateral root ע–ת–ר (*a-t-r*). In the *qal*, the root *atr* means to pray or to supplicate, parenthetically clarified (to God). In the *nifal* as might be expected, the word means to be "supplicated," "entreated (and grant entreaty, always of God)" and is reflexive, indicating that one has been moved by entreaties,

[28] Genesis 25:1.

and in the *hifil*, the word means to pray or to plead.[29] In essence the human being wants something and prays to God. And yet, although the language may be relatively simple, the relationship that exists between humankind and God in each utterance of prayer is far more complex.

PRAYER: A TURNING OF THE WILL OF THE DIVINE

The Rabbis understood that Isaac's plea (*atr*) served to overturn God's position, literally to influence God's countenance; God reverses God's decision regarding Rebekkah's fertility and allows her to conceive. The imagery is similar to that used for one who employs tools to reconstitute or overturn the soil, thereby allowing it to become more fertile. In Genesis *Rabbah*, the fifth century *midrash* on the first book of the Bible, Reish Lakish, referring to Isaac, said, "He reversed her destiny, and for that reason, a pitchfork is called '*athra'* (like *atr*) because it turns over grain."[30]

We find a similar understanding of the relationship between God and those who pray expressed in the Babylonian Talmud. However, in the Talmud, the Rabbis distinguish between the prayers of the general population and those of the righteous. Only the prayers of the *righteous* are seen to have this "pitchfork" effect. "Why" asks Rabbi Isaac "is the prayer of the righteous compared to the pitchfork?…It is the prayers of the *righteous* that turn the dispensations of the Holy One, blessed be He, from the attribute of anger to the attribute of mercy. [31]"

[29] In Acadian there is a similar parallel between *salu* "to ask" and the reciprocal, "to respond."
[30] Genesis *Rabbah* 63:4-5.
[31] Babylonian Talmud *Yavemot* 64a.

This parallel in the Talmud reflects the Rabbis' conception that human prayers could somehow alter the attitude or attributes of the Divine. Like the earth that can be turned over and prepared to receive the seeds sown by men, so too, might God's thinking or presence of mind be altered by prayer offerings of the righteous.

The text reflects a worldview suggesting that the prayers of the righteous somehow are differentiated from the prayers of others. The *midrash* goes further in delineating the worldview that God responds to and indeed acts upon the prayers of the righteous. This differentiation—a binary distinction between those who are righteous and the rest of society—was crucial to the rabbinic understanding of the world. It is perhaps not surprising that the Rabbis, the individuals responsible for codifying the parameters of righteousness, would have had an interest in segregating the efficacy of the prayers of the righteous from those of the rest of humankind. Their authority was vested in the perpetuation of their system. Regardless of their motivations, the Rabbis' way of thinking made it clear that God's nature could be changed through prayer. From Isaac's perspective it is far simpler: he entreated (*atr*) *Adonai*, *Adonai* was entreated (*he' atar*) by his calling, and Rebekkah conceived.

Aviva Zornberg in her beautiful work, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* elaborates on the Rabbis' understanding of the nature of prayers in this mode. Perhaps Isaac's prayers were answered, according to the Rabbis, because as Zornberg observes:

> The transformative energy of prayer can move God from anger to mercy. The pitchfork tosses the grain sheaves, changing their position and their place. The act of *turning, inverting*, is *revolutionary*; it reveals what is hidden. The word *atr* a

> pitchfork is also used for a plough, which turns over the sods of earth to create a newly fertile surface. The motion of the pitchfork or the plough tears open, enters darkness to bring to light something that has been buried. The prayer of the righteous, the *midrash* claims, has this transfigurative effect.[32]

Although the transformative nature of prayer must be recognized and internalized for prayer to be real, understanding the theological rationale for prayer that changes the nature of God's countenance from cruel to merciful remains challenging for us. How we begin to comprehend the power of prayer and the extra rational nature of this understanding coheres with our understanding of the relationship between humanity and the Divine.

JUSTICE AND MERCY

In other writings, we find the Rabbis more commonly contrast mercy (*rachamim)* not with cruelty or anger as we find in the Talmud, but rather with justice (*din*).[33] In considering fertility in this context, the conceptual relationship between mercy and justice (*rachamim* and *din*) is complicated as one is forced to consider the circumstances under which infertility might be seen as just. In the context of the matriarchs and in the context of any woman or couple that has suffered from the excruciating pain of infertility, a sense of "just" or "unjust" fertility is nearly unfathomable. In the Talmud, when asked what God's own prayer would be for God's self, God responds:

> From here (we learn) that the Holy One Blessed be He, prays. What does He pray? Rav Zutra bar Toviyah said in the name of Rav: May it be My will that My mercy (*rachami*) conquer My anger, and that my mercy overcome My attributes, and that I

[32] Aviva G. Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken, 2009), 238.
[33] Babylonian Talmud *Yavamot* 64a.

behave towards My children with the attribute of mercy and that for their sake I go beyond the boundary of judgment (*ha'din*).[34]

On so many levels, the image of God praying is, in itself, a fairly stunning notion. However that God would pray for mercy to overcome justice perhaps speaks to the overwhelming injustice and suffering extant in the real world, and as a projection of humanity's eternal need for God's compassion.[35] The role of suffering in our lives, and how we come to understand God's relationship to suffering will be explored below, as well as in later chapters.

In Hebrew, the linguistic relationship between compassion (*rachamim*) and womb (*rechem*) carries its own irony when considering prayers for fertility. In the Torah text there is no mention of Rebekkah praying for herself. However, the *midrash* struggles to give voice to her yearnings and to understand the relationship between her and Isaac, and the co-mingling of their prayers. Although elsewhere we hear Abraham's concern for Sarah, it is never explicitly articulated in a prayer. As noted above, Isaac is the first patriarch to pray explicitly for his wife's fertility. Perhaps one might consider the impact that his mother's unhappiness has had upon Isaac, prompting heightened sensitivity toward his wife's condition. Isaac finds Rebekkah immediately following the death of his mother and she is brought into Sarah's tent. As is often the case, new love furnishes comfort in the face of loss and the insecurity of liminal and shifting realities.

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[34] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 7a.

[35] This concept was carried forward in Midrash *HaGadol* to Genesis 25:21. Just like the winnowing tool, turns over the ground, so too, do the prayers of the righteous; reversing God's from the aspect of cruelty to the quality of compassion. It was within man's capacity to pray, to plead, to supplicate and that indeed the prayer would be responded to by God, Who would in essence reverse the decree.

OUR PRAYERS: GOD AND THE OTHER

The text helps us to consider how through our own circumstances, suffering and joys we come to live in relationship with others and how these experiences might influence the depth, passion and compassion of our own prayers. Our experiences—our victories and our losses—help to shape our relationships on earth and through them, we seek to understand and to relate to the Divine. Perhaps the birth paradigm is perfect for this consideration. As human beings, the gift of reproduction is centrally dependent on man, woman and God. The power of Isaac's plea to God on behalf (*linochach*) of his wife is breathtaking. Isaac pleads (*atr*) with God and in a possible aural word play with the Hebrew, Rebekkah conceives (*vatahr*). God answers Isaac's plea, the plea is accepted and Rebekkah's fertility is confirmed. The couple pleads for fertility and their prayer is answered.

Later in the Bible, the same verb is used again when Manoah's wife is infertile, but we do not have evidence that he prayed to God for fertility. We see only that an angel of the Lord visits the wife of Manoah and recognizes her barrenness. The angel foresees that she will conceive and, indeed, this becomes a reality. Later in the chapter, Manoah pleads (*atr*) with the angel: *"Manoah pleaded (*va yetar*) with the Lord! He said, 'Please let the man of God that You sent come to us again, and let him instruct us how to act with the child that is to be born.'"*[36] Like all parents seeking God's guidance, their prayers need not be limited to matters of fertility. It is nearly impossible to comprehend parents' ongoing challenges in guiding the children we are blessed to co-create with God. We might read Manoah's prayer as every parent's prayer: Please God help me to know how to help my children to grow and to live; how to become the people they need to be. Please God, help me to know how to teach them so that they might learn to live in Your service. Perhaps we might understand this

[36] Judges 11:8.

prayer to articulate the essence of the one we recite each Shabbat as we bless our children with the *Birkat Kohanim:*

May God bless you and keep you.

May God deal kindly and graciously (*vchunekah*) with you.

May God bestow God's favor upon you and grant you peace![37]

Children, may you not be alone as you face the challenges of life. May God be gracious (*chane*) to you. May God recognize you and bless you and grant you peace. May God in God's grace bring you peace. In this instance, peace does not mean, happy or rich or unfettered, or unstressed, or giddy, or successful or safe. Rather, it means "at peace," a state wherein which God has blessed you and you might feel God's presence in your midst. This peace is not a literal absence of war, but a completeness state of *sheleimut*. Derived from *shalom*, this term intimates a place of completeness where the fragmentation of all of our lives has been kept at bay and where the contradiction between our intellectual and our active selves has been resolved. It is a state where balance is achieved, where we are blessed, where we might find God, and where God turns a face upon us.

Manoah prayed for guidance on behalf of his child; Isaac prayed for conception on behalf of his wife. Rashi understands Isaac's prayer as not on "behalf" (*lenuchach*) of his wife, but more accurately as "opposite" her, elaborating upon the configuration of their bodies during the prayer and by extension on their overall relationship to one another.[38] They literally prayed "facing one another." In Genesis *Rabbah* we see that the Rabbis in the purest *midrashic* style have extrapolated and given us the words of the prayer offered by both Isaac and Rebekkah: "Sovereign of the Universe! May all the children which Thou wilt

[37] Numbers 6:24-26.
[38] Rashi Commentary on Genesis 25:21.

grant me be from this righteous woman." The *midrash* continues, "She, too, prayed likewise."[39]

In the English translation, the text reads "and she prayed likewise. "However, if one literally translates the Hebrew from the Genesis *Rabbah,* we note the parallel words and the symmetry of their prayers:

> He says, all the children that You will give to be me in the future
>
> May they be from this righteous woman.
>
> She says, May it be so that all the children that you will give to me
>
> May they be from this righteous man.[40]

The prayers of the couple are shadows of one another, inversions, transpositions, and mirrors—one of the other. Each of them prays that the gift to be granted by God, the unfathomable gift of parenthood, might be fulfilled in partnership with none other than their righteous, beloved who stands before them. The symbiotic relationship of the lovers is perfectly encapsulated in the words of the text from Song of Songs, "*I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*"[41] Could Hagar and Ishmael be far from Isaac's mind when he prays to God on behalf of his Rebekkah? Could the reality of the bifurcation of his father's progeny, his singling out, his promise of patriarchal peoplehood be far from his heart when he prays on behalf of, in front of, or in tandem with his wife?

[39] Genesis *Rabbah* 63:5.
[40] The author's translation.
[41] Song of Songs 6:3.

PRAYERS BEYOND THE MOMENT IN TIME

In *Pirke d' Rabbi Eliezer*, the eighth/ninth century Narrative Midrash,

> "Rabbi Judah said: Rebekkah was barren for twenty years. After twenty years (Isaac) took Rebekkah and went (with her) to Mount Moriah, to the place where he had been bound, and he prayed on her behalf concerning the conception of her womb; and the Holy One, blessed be He, was entreated of him."[42]

According to the Rabbis, Isaac took her to the mountain, to the centrality of the *akeida*, the place where Isaac was bound by his father. At the very site where God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore does Isaac beseech God.[43] It is with *this* righteous woman, after 20 years of attempting to conceive that I pray you will fulfill Your promise to our ancestors in the specificity of my prayer to you, in the context of the grandness of your promise.

Norman Cohen describes Isaac's words not only as a prayer about the family and about the descendants of Isaac and Rebekkah, but also as a place marker on the declaration that the promise of the Jewish people might be fulfilled. This promise was granted to Abraham, when, called upon by God, he did not ask questions, but responded simply, "Here I am" (*hineini*), prepared to serve You without reservation or inquiry.[44] Abraham expresses his unconditional commitment before God, and ultimately God calls on Abraham to offer his son, his most favored son, as a sacrifice. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice all, even his son, his most beloved son, is understood by the Rabbis to have resulted in this promise from

[42] *Pirke d' Rabbi Eliezer*,Chapter 32.
[43] Genesis 22:17.
[44] Norman Cohen, *Hineini in Our Lives* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2003),1-12.

God.[45] The Rabbis further understood Abraham's sacrifice and the resulting promise from God to accrue to us, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Because of the unconditional commitment of our forefathers in the service of God, we have inherited God's sacred commitment to the people of Israel.

When we consider the mantel of our inheritance and its origin with our forefathers, matters related to communal and corporate participation and the covenant (*brit*) are intensified. We do not stand alone before God, but rather as members of the community of Israel. The Rabbis have given much thought to the hierarchy of personal versus communal prayers, and this discussion is extensive in the Talmud. The prayers of the community always take precedence over the prayers of the individual. By placing Isaac atop Mt. Moriah to pray to God for God's intervention, the Rabbis compel us to hear the communal nature of his plea (*atr*). Isaac pleaded with God, for himself, for the sake of his wife and, perhaps most importantly, for the sake of the Jewish future. God responded to his plea. In *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, a 13th century minor *midrashic* anthology, the Rabbis express their belief that God responds to prayers on the basis of the merit (*zechut*) of Abraham because Isaac has already been bound by Abraham as an marker of Abraham's love of God.[46]

In Chapter 4, we will address the reality of prayers that go unanswered and how we as human beings might deal with this circumstance. Barrenness, as a permanent condition, is extraordinarily painful, both physiologically and spiritually. The Torah and later the Rabbis understood both the prevalence and the bitterness of infertility. What do we do when our pleas are not answered? What do we do when we, our wives, our daughters or our friends do

[45] There is a very rich tradition of *Midrashim* (and proto *midrashim*) that helps deepen our understanding of the *Akeida*. These include works on Abraham's prayer and the meaning of his tears, which are said to result in Isaac's blindness. These and other *midrashim* provide us with ample opportunities for further study.
[46] *Midrash Sekhel* Tov to Genesis 25.

not conceive? How do we keep faith with God when our prayers, our pleas, our petitions and our pleading (*atr*) go unheeded (*he'atar*).

APOLOGIES FOR REBEKKAH IN HER FOWARDNESS

There is a secondary definition of *atr* which has its sources in the Aramaic word for "abundant." Rashi understands the verb to mean "to increase" or "to grow," and he gives us the parallel French word, "*engresser*." [47] In *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, the Rabbis employ this definition of the word in their understanding of the nature of Isaac's prayer. They, too believed that Isaac prayed on behalf of his wife. However, rather than appeal to God regarding her fertility, Isaac prays that she might be forgiven for her excessive imploring and for her forwardness. The proof text offered by Ezekiel, "And you spoke arrogantly against Me, and multiplied (*v hatartem*) your words against Me: I have heard it,"[48] describes Rebekkah as speaking arrogantly and presumptuously on her own behalf rather than relying upon the fulfillment of Isaac's prayer to the promise made to Abraham on Mt. Moriah.

Here again, the Rabbis focus on the unique validity of the righteous. They struggle with the notion that an individual who has not been singled out for righteousness, for example Rebekkah's brothers, might get credit for the efficacy of their prayers. The concern in *Sekhel Tov* is that Rebekkah's brothers should not think that unmerited prayers might be responsible for ending her barrenness.[49]

This reading is antithetical to the notion of an accessible, compassionate God who hears all our prayers. In other places and in other eras, we note that the Rabbis are more open

[47] Rashi Commentary on Genesis 25:21.
[48] Ezekiel 35:13.
[49] *Midrash Sekhel Tov* to Genesis 25.21.

and comfortable with this facet of God. Perhaps in the post-Crusade milieu during which the *Sekhel Tov* anthology was completed, the Rabbis were seeking to understand the horrific realities experienced in their community. Perhaps by viewing the world in the context of unanswered prayer because of death, destruction, illness or loss, we are better able to build a perspective based on the outlook communicated in this *midrash*.

This post-Crusades notion of a limited and ungenerous God also seems antithetical to the Heschelian understanding that God might somehow respond to or, more poignantly, have a need for our prayers.[50] Might we ever be so bold as to imagine that we humans, infinitely minute in our countenance and bearing, might in some way have an impact upon the Divine? Where might we stand on the continuum regarding our own understanding of God's responding to and answering (*he'ater*) our prayers? Yet, we strive to internalize the place of God in our lives, the potential for God's compassion upon us, and our ability to influence this Presence.

DIVERGENT PRAYERS

In the course of this study, we have considered multiple uses of the verb "to plead" (*atr*). In some cases, the verb is used to plead on behalf of another. Indeed in the case of Rebekkah, it is the voice of Isaac that we hear articulating a prayer on behalf of his wife. In other parts of the Bible, we note the use of the verb on behalf of second and third parties. In the book of Exodus, Pharaoh acknowledges that the pain meted out by God to the Egyptians is insufferable, the swarms of insects too difficult to bear. Pharaoh then gives Moses permission to make sacrifices to God at a respectable distance from the camp, only if he,

[50] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 292.

Moses, agrees to entreat (*heitaru*) on behalf the Egyptians.[51] Moses, as agent, complies with the request. The text continues, "*And Moses went out from Pharoah and entreated (*va*'*yeater*) the Lord*."[52] Both Moses' plea (*atr*) to God and Isaac's plea (*atr*) to God are accepted (*ye'ater*); God clearly responds to both.

There is, however, a clear difference in the quality and validity of the primary request of each. In the case of Moses, *Adonai* did as Moses had asked and, in essence, God responded to the request. We learn, however, that Pharaoh was deceitful, immediately returning to his old ways. Inspite of Moses' earnest nature there is an underlying sense of betrayal or lack of truthfulness in the petition. Was Moses merely an "agent for deceit" or perhaps a partner, a facilitator, or an enabler before the Divine? What happens when far-reaching circumstances cause us to pray for eventualities that we may truly not believe in or desire? The Talmud teaches that the power of prayer is enhanced when the object of the prayers of the many are the same.

> For the notion that he that prays "for another"- though he himself is in need of the same remedy - his prayer will be answered first. [53]

It is understood that a shared purpose is effective in reaching the Divine through prayer. What are the considerations when the purpose and words of prayer are in effect not compatible?

In Exodus 9:28 we have the same motif as detailed above: Pharaoh entreats (*atar*) Moses to ask God to stop the hail and in return, the people of Israel will be freed. Later in the chapter, Moses tells Pharaoh that he will do so. Moses goes outside the city and spreads his hands in prayer so that the Egyptians will come to "*know that the earth belongs to*

[51] Exodus 8:24.
[52] Exodus 8:26.
[53] Babylonian Talmud *Baba Kama* 92a.

God."[54] Norman Cohen reads this spreading of the hands, this pleading, as a petition to God to stop the killing rain and indeed to save a life. This prayer is parallel to Isaac's pleading (*atar*) to God to sustain life and to ensure that Rebekkah is fertile. Yet once Pharaoh sees that the plagues have stopped, he again returns to his evil ways, his heart is hardened, the Israelites are not freed and the promise of redemption is delayed yet again. Once more, Pharaoh uses Moses, manipulating the leader's access to God.

In Exodus 10:18 once more is Moses begged by Pharaoh to petition *Adonai* on his behalf. "*And, he went out from Pharaoh and he entreated the Lord,*" and yet again, the plague was reversed. As we've seen before, Moses pleaded and God responded, but then God stiffened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh went back on his agreement. (Much has been written about why God would have hardened Pharaoh's heart.[55]) In spite of Pharaoh's deception, we see that God hears his (indirect) prayers, and from the perspective of the Torah, responds, even when he prays for the same things more than once. How do we reconcile God's patience, God's unwavering tolerance for *teshuvah*, and God's magnanimous nature and acceptance of all who come to God with an honest heart with God's conscious decision to harden Pharaoh's heart? In this case, it seems that an assessment is being made regarding the integrity, the honesty and the veracity of the prayers. It is not clear to us through our reading of Torah that Pharaoh had participated truthfully and honestly in sincerely seeking change. Although Moses petitions and God answers his requests, the true nature of Pharaoh's motivation remains unclear.

[54] Exodus 9:29.
[55] Exodus *Rabbah*13:3.

The Rabbis struggled as well with the ambiguity of Pharaoh's response. Commenting in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael[56] on Pharaoh's inconsistency, they seem to see the value and the potential for changing one's heart. Acknowledging the potential for change, they ask what will be the reward for Pharaoh who at first claims that he does not know the Lord, and then recognizes that God fought on behalf of the Israelites and that, "*there should be an altar to the Lord in the land of Egypt*."[57] The Mekhilta continues:

> The mouth that had said "who is the Lord, that I should hearken to His voice? That same mouth said: "The Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked. What reward did they receive for this? A place to be buried in was given to them, as it is stated, "Thou stretches out Thy right hand—the earth swallowed them.[58]

The Mekhilta also comments on the necessity for truth and God's ability to see this truth and to expose it. The *midrash* explains that God exposed the truth of the situation when evil had been done:

> If with regard to meting out evil, which is of less importance, the rule is that God makes public the deeds done in secret, how much more should this be the rule with regard to meting out good, which is of greater importance?

God's ability to read the truth in our hearts speaks to the grandeur and omnipresence of the Divine. Perhaps these texts serve as a warning, evidence of what happens when one tries to manipulate God or calls on God for purposes that are less than honest—when we in effect use God's name in vain. Pharaoh, the embodiment of enslavement and subjugation, represents for us those things that enslave us, that limit our potential, and that diminish our spirit.

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[56]Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Massekta d'Beshallah*, Chapter 1.
[57]Isaiah 19:19.
[58]Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Massekta d'Beshallah*, Chapter 1.

Moses, at the bidding of Pharaoh prayed for the plagues to stop. The Egyptians spared from the plague, return to their evil ways, and the greater course of history is ultimately altered as the Israelites are freed on the weight of the repeated insincerity. These, the birth pangs of the Jewish people, ultimately lead to redemption. The relationship between what we pray for and the eventuality of life is never linear. Sometimes, understanding how eventualities reflect God's ultimate compassion is beyond our comprehension.

WHAT MIGHT IT MEAN THAT GOD HEARS OUR PRAYERS?

In the case of Rebekkah, we learn that Isaac entreated (*atr*) and that God was entreated (*he'atar*). In the case of Manoah, we learn that he entreated (*va y'atar*) and that God hearkened (*yishma*) to his voice. In the former, the Torah confirms that God is moved by our prayers, accepting our entreating; in the latter, that indeed God hears our prayers. The winnowing of the pleading (*atar*) causes God to attune to our needs and transforms God's quality of justice (or perhaps worse, God's complete indifference), to a quality of mercy. We are taught by the Rabbis that we do not stand alone in the world, but rather that God hears and responds to our prayers. In this regard, the Rabbis offer us a beautiful reading of the nature of this response in the *aggadic* story of the son of a king who is digging for treasure:

> *and Isaac entreated (va y'atar) the Lord* (Ex 25:21). R. Johanan and Resh Lakish explained this. R. Johanan said: It means that he poured out petitions in abundance. Resh Lakish said: He reversed her destiny, and for that reason a pitchfork is called athra, because it turns the grain…R. Judah said in the name of Resh Lakish: She

> lacked an ovary, whereupon the Lord fashioned an ovary for her *and the Lord Let Himself be entreated*. R. Levi said: This may be compared to the son of a king who was digging through to his father to receive a *litra* (pound) of gold from him, and thus one [the king] dug (*chotar*) from within while the other [his son] dug (*chotar*) from without.[59]

In both Hebrew and Arabic, the verb *chotar* is defined as "digging," and we hear the similarity between the digging (*chotar*) and the pleading (*atar*), with only the transmuting of the Hebrew letter *chet* for the Hebrew letter *ayin*. The image here suggests that as we pray to God—as we reach heavenly for the Divine—that God, too, reaches toward us, attempting to meet us where we are. In other words, God comes toward us as far as we need God to come. There is an immense reciprocity expressed by the simplicity of this imagery. This digging imagery also suggests that our prayers dig deepest into the hearts of our own souls, turning over in our hearts and minds the truth and depth of what we need.

In Deuteronomy *Rabbah*, the Rabbis express their confidence in God's gracious nature, even when we forget God's presence and even when we neglect our obligations:

> When Manasseh saw that he was in a sore plight, and that not one of these idols answered him, he began to call upon God. He said: 'Master of the Universe, behold, I have called upon all the idols of the world and I have learnt that there is no reality in them; Thou Master of the Universe art a God above all gods, and if Thou wilt not answer me I will declare, heaven forfend, that all Beings are alike?' Thereupon God answered him: Ah, wicked man, by right, I should not answer you, because you have provoked Me to anger; but in order not to close the door before the penitent, that they should not say, "Lo, Manasseh sought to repent but he was not received," I will

[59] Genesis *Rabbah* 63:5.

> answer you? Whence do we know this? For it is said, *And he prayed unto Him; and He was entreated (vaye'ather) of him (II Chron. 33:13)*; read, (*vayehater*). This teaches that the ministering angels had closed up the windows of the firmament to prevent his prayer reaching heaven, but what did God do? He broke through the firmament beneath His Throne of Glory and received his prayer.[60]

We come before God vulnerable, fertile for new growth and open, as we express our needs and concerns to *Adonai*. The Rabbis return, again and again, to the power of our entreating (*atar*), our ability to overturn the decisions of the Divine.

[60] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 2:20.

CHAPTER 2

GOD HEARS PRAYERS FROM THE HEART

There are prayers that are answered in thirty years…But in the case of Hannah hers were never heard; but answered.

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:20

יש תפלה שהיא נענית לשלשים שנה ...
אבל בחנה לא שמענוה

COMMENTS ON THE TRADITIONAL PRAYER CALL

When considering the terms for prayer that appear in the Bible, the most common and traditionally recognized one is *tefillah*. The trilateral root *p-l-l* (פ–ל–ל) centers on the idea of judgment. In the Hebrew grammatical form *piel*, it means to "arbitrate" or to "intercede." However, it is in the grammatical form *hitpallel* that it means simply "to pray." The reflexive sense of the *hitpallel* involves a self-judging and an introspective aspect of prayer.

Seth Kadish in his work, *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer*, describes prayer in the Bible as an action, "based on the social analogy of inter-human speech."[61] He understands the forms of the verb root *pll* as the placeholders or markers for this relationship. Kadish explains that the verb must be understood "to roughly mean 'to seek a (favorable) judgment for oneself (from God).'" Kadish then reads the word *hitpallel* to be parallel to *hitchanan*. Saadya Gaon also read this parallel between the verbs.[62] This analysis will attempt to draw a distinction between the petitionary judgment seeking nature of the *pallal* verb and the more mercy-seeking nature of the verb *chanan*.

Moshe Greenberg originally developed the concept of the "social analogy" in his work, *Biblical Prose Prayer*: *As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel*.[63] Greenberg believed that all petitions to God were modeled on human speech because God is seen as "sentient, willing, purposeful, as having the attributes of a person. To express communication with such a being, biblical man employs the language of human intercourse, since this is the only model available for interpersonal communication."[64] So, humans seek particular outcomes. Human beings negotiate with God on behalf of themselves or others.

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[61] Seth Kadish, *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* (Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997), 71.
[62] Kadish, *Kavvana*, 73 note 15.
[63] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 19.
[64] Greenberg, *Biblical Prose*, 22.

Humanity presents this case in the form of prayer. The Bible understands that God then weighs the evidence presented, and then responds. It seems so simple and straightforward, yet the depth of conversation and the potential for interface between humanity and the Divine must never be underestimated.

In the *Midrash Pesikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov*),[65] a medieval anthology of earlier *midrashim*, the Rabbis contemplated the tension between the immanence of a God with Whom conversation was feasible and the reality of the One that was the creator of all.[66] Later in the medieval period, the tension between immanence and transcendence was further explored, the Rabbis understanding that immanence in the face of transcendence made prayer even more meaningful.

The Rabbis introduced many different forms of prayer with many different names, recognizing that similar forms might be used to address peers or persons of authority. They drew a significant distinction between addressing God and addressing human beings. They note in the *midrash* that the language of prayer (*lashon tefillah*) must necessarily be reserved for the Creator alone.[67]

How do we both engage in a lifelong relationship with the Divine and remember that the underlying communication is, by definition, being conducted on two different planes? In the conversation between human beings, the reciprocity and equality of beings that have both been created in God's image is a dual refraction of the Divine. However in *tefillah*, where one party is the Divine, one side of the communication is, by definition, unrefracted.

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[65] *Pesikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov)* on Deuteronomy 3:23.

[66] Later, more philosophical conceptions of God rejected the conversational potential of our relationship with God, but the reality and the potential for communication hold great potential. *Maimonides Guide to the Perplexed* III 52.

[67] *Pesikta Zutrata* (*Lehak Tov*) on Deuteronomy 3:23.

Although Martin Buber believed that the Divine dwells in and amongst the conversation between two people conducted on an I/Thou level, the Rabbis in the *midrash* believed otherwise.[68] Language is important; naming matters. How we identify our conversations and how we conceptualize these modes of communication contribute significantly to understanding the nature of our relationship with God.

MOMENTS OF *TEFILLAH* IN TORAH

In an attempt to better understand our modes of communication with the Divine, we continue our analysis of the biblical language used to frame prayer moments. Toward this end, we have looked at all the places in the Bible where the verb associated with classical prayer *tefillah* (*pll*) is used. These moments have been reviewed and considered in an attempt to understand the nuance and application of the concept.

With respect to *pll*, we note that the first use of the verb may be found in Genesis, where Abraham prayed (*va yitpallel*) on behalf of Avimelech and his wife.[69] The *midrash* makes the following observation with respect to this prayer by Abraham:

> R. Hama ben Hanina said: "This expression (*hitpallel*) occurs here for the first time in the Book of Genesis. When Abraham prayed, a knot was untied, (i.e., the tangled relationship between man and God was straightened out and from now on men could pray).[70]

[68] Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 68.
[69] Genesis 20:17.
[70] Genesis Rabbah 52:13.

The Rabbis saw this prayer by Abraham as an opening in the channels of communication with the Divine. There is a particularly complex relationship expressed here: Abraham had concealed Sarah's identity, telling Avimelech that Sarah was Abraham's sister (not his wife) so that Abraham himself could benefit from a positive relationship with Avimelech. It is fascinating (and worthy of far more in-depth study) that Abraham's prayer on behalf of Avimelech and Avimelech's wife is the first articulated prayer. Abraham does not pray directly for Sarah's fertility, nor for the joy and potential of his wife and their family, but rather for the wife of Avimelech, for as we read in Torah, "*Adonai had completely shut every womb of Avimelech's household on account of Abraham's wife Sarah.*"[71] It is deeply ironic that this articulated prayer is for them and not for Sarah, who also suffered greatly in her failure to conceive. Harold Kushner suggests that, "only after Abraham prayed for others are his prayers for his own needs met."[72]

Is Kushner correct? The reasons that leaders and people in authority—particularly righteous and religious individuals—might discharge the obligations of their office at the expense of the needs of their family members continue to resonate. Why do the cobbler's children have no shoes? When do the obligations of public service eclipse the needs of the family? When and if is this ever justified? The potential for the Jewish people was embedded in this prayer. God had closed the wombs of Avimelech's entire household on behalf of Sarah. And yet, Abraham, the man who would later come to bind his as yet un-conceived child, prayed for fertility for Avimelech and his wife rather than for Sarah, his own wife. The mystery of God's ways and the shortsightedness of human intervention loom large as we consider this first formal prayer (*pll*).

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[71] Genesis 20:17.
[72] Harold Kushner, *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, ed. David L. Lieber and others (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), commentary on Genesis 20:17.

We find another significant trope of the verb prayer (*pll)* in the book of Numbers.[73] Here, God was so disgusted with the people's relentless complaining that he brought a fire upon the camp. The people in great fear cried out (*vayitzak)* to Moses, and Moses prayed (*va yitpallel*) to *Adonai* and the fire died down. Moses petitions to God on behalf of the Israelites; he prays in response to their pain. The *Mekhilta* comments on how Moses, in some instances, attempts to calm God; in others, it is God Who seeks to calm Moses.[74] This interpretation connotes for us the Rabbis' understanding that Moses, the prophet of the people, had power to influence God. According to the Rabbis, God also took responsibility for quieting Moses in his times of complete frustration and disappointment. The *midrash* portrays God's relationship with Moses as symbiotic, each one in turn meeting the needs of the other.

The potential for God to support us in our times of trouble and conversely that we might comfort the Divine raises an interesting theological construct that continues to be relevant in our own lives. We, of course, do not hold the power of prophecy that belonged uniquely to Moses. However, there are times when it is we who must appeal to God for mercy, while at other times we pray that God will allow us to see the merciful sides of ourselves. Might it be our prayers that comfort God? Where do we see ourselves on this continuum? When do we pray to God for patience and generosity toward our children or toward those that have let us down? When do we understand that the law demands more compassion from us than we might willingly have wanted to give? When do we recognize that our demands on others are perhaps more than they should be expected to bear? Where do we understand prayer and God to fit into our understanding of this relationship?

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[73] Numbers 11:2.
[74] Mekhilta *Vayasseh* 7:23, Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*: A Critical Edition, vol 1* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 251.

Later in Numbers, following the death of Aaron, the Israelites found themselves engaged in battle against the Canaanites. They vowed to God, making promises of self-denial in the event of victory. God "*delivered the Israelites*." Then the victories soured and the people in their perpetual railing against their fate cried out against God and against Moses, "*Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness?"*[75] In this case, God responds by sending *seraphim* against the people, and many were bitten and killed. Realizing the cost of their failure of faith, the people come and confess to Moses, "*We have sinned by speaking against Adonai and against you. Intercede (va yitpallel) with God…*"[76] God responds, this time offering a copper *seraph* on a rod that would provide healing powers. All who had been bitten saw the rod and were healed. We witness again the intercessional power of the prayer offered by Moses, and in the text below, the Rabbis' understanding of human vulnerability and of God's magnanimous nature. In their hearts, the Israelites were repentant and thus God accepts the validity of their appeal, judging in their favor. In the Babylonian Talmud, the Rabbis acknowledge the necessity for faith in supporting this commitment on the part of the Divine:

> The text signifies that so long as Israel turned their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their father in heaven, they prevailed, but otherwise they fell.[77]

It reflects as well, the Rabbis' complete confidence that God intervenes in our lives and is present in our distress, weighing our merits and our responsive to God's call. In the eyes of the Rabbis, God is a God Who hears our repentance and responds to our pleas. And yet, in a world filled with violence and pain and disappointment, complete adherence to this belief structure remains challenging. The medieval philosophers also resonated with this

[75] Numbers 21:5.
[76] Numbers 21:7.
[77] Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 29a

understanding of God as a forgiving and loving God. In his work *Duties of the Heart*, Bachya Ibn Paquda articulates his beliefs:

> Prayer is given to you by God on trust, a security that He has placed in your hands, and under your control; no one can monitor it beside Him. If you pray as God commanded, you live up to the trust He places in you, and He will accept your prayer.[78]

The relationship between accepting and answering prayer raises questions as we in the post modern world attempt to understand our own relationship with the Divine.

Within the Torah, the references to *pll* seem to contrast relatively starkly with the pleading prayers of the heart that utilize the *atr* verb. Prayers using the *pll* root seem to imply that the actor or the pray-er is negotiating with God, sometimes on his own behalf and often on behalf of another. After the sin of the golden calf, Moses reports: "*Moreover, Adonai was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him; so I also interceded (*v tpallel*) for Aaron at the time.*"[79] Here again, Moses is pleading Aaron's case in the court of the Divine.

We read in Pesikta Rabbati of the Rabbis' confidence in God's willingness to accept our petitions. The Rabbis portray God as One who recognizes and in effect needs to forgive and to pardon those who seek forgiveness. They recast the balance between humanity and God, re-conceptualizing what it means for God to forgive.

> Who will speak first? God replied: You speak first: Speak thou, that thou may be justified (Is 43:26) for if I win out over you in the lawsuit, I will be the one who loses. But if you win out over Me, then I will win. I won out over the generation of the

[78] Bachya Ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, trans. Yaakov Feldman (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 697.
[79] Deuteronomy 9:20.

> flood and lost…On the other hand, at the making of the golden calf, Moses won out over Me, and thus I won. Hence it is My wish that you win out over Me. As scripture says, *The Lord delights in pronouncing [Israel] righteous* (Isa. 42:21) Nevertheless, since I am called God of justice and God of truth, make sure when you stand before Me on New Years Day to lift up shofars and blow them, [to remind Me that My loss is My gain]. Then no matter how many accusers you have, they will be disregarded.[80]

The Rabbis portray God as one biased in favor of humanity and following the debacle of the flood, committed to keeping both the Divine's universal covenant with humanity and the more particularistic covenant with the people of Israel. The Rabbis see the Divine as having a vested interest in being compassionate with humanity. The tabulation of the judging and arbitrating are clear, but God acknowledges (in the eyes of the Rabbis) that *defeating* the people is at best a hollow victory. Tough love is painful. We often prefer to lose. There are times when our triumphs are often at the expense of the ones we love. How do we learn to be more God-like in these matters within and about our own lives?

In our own *tefillah*, we present our case—the realities of our lives, our successes and our failures—before the Divine, each of us acknowledging our strengths and weaknesses and pleading our case before God. Sometimes we win, sometimes we don't, however, conceptualizing God as interested in our winning offers an inspiring foundation as Heschel notes regarding the relationship between God and humanity:

> In every act we either answer or defy, we either return or move away, we either fulfill or miss the goal. Life consists of endless opportunities to sanctify the profane,

[80] *Pesikta Rabbati Piska* 40:4.

> opportunities to redeem the power of God from the chain of potentialities, opportunities to serve spiritual ends.[81]

In Deuteronomy 9:26, we read, *"I prayed,* (va'etpallel) *to* Adonai *and said, "O my master, Adonai, do not annihilate Your very own people, Your inheritance, whom You have redeemed in Your majesty…."* Particularly in this instance we see a reminder of God's previous commitment to and relationship with the People Israel, namely God's appointment of the people as God's inheritance. It is on the merit of all that has preceded this moment that Moses predicates his *tefillah* to God. The Rabbis, imbued with the sense of the generous and compassionate nature of God, appreciated Moses' petitioning for the Israelites in spite of their breech.

> From this expression Moses seized a hint how to find some defense for Israel. He said before God: Master of the Universe, I have received commands, have I then transgressed any one of them? They have received no commands and therefore they did not know….R Hiyya ben Abba said: Moses left no corner of heaven upon which he did not prostrate himself in prayer.[82]

Here we see Moses, petitioning, cajoling, and even accepting the blame himself for the failure of the Israelites. He is in effect expending his own personal capital, reminding the Divine of the paradox of winning, in an attempt to salvage the relationship between God and the people. When we stand as members of the covenant (*brit*) before God, our prayers exceed the merits of our unique selves. The leaders of our people have, since the time of the Bible, petitioned God on our behalf, the essence of Jewish continuity and the greater needs of our people, exceeding the needs of our individual selves. The Rabbis teaching us that in a

[81] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 291.
[82] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 3:11.

collective, our prayers are more likely to be answered. Here, Moses stood up to God on behalf of the people and on behalf of the potential of the Jewish spirit. We too must always stand tall, bringing our best selves before the Divine and contributing our energy and talents to this endeavor. We pray that God might always accept that losing to his children is in effect God's greatest gift to us.

THE CALL FOR PRAYER BEYOND THE TORAH
SELF, STRUGGLE AND CHANGE

As we leave the *Torah* and move to the Prophets (*Neviim)* and the Writings (*Ketuvim)* we see a progression in the use of the concept of prayer (*pll*). We find a second quantum leap as we move from the biblical canon to the *aggadic midrashim*. In the *Torah* we find only nine references to the *pll* root; in the Bible as a whole we find 90; and in the *aggadic midrashim* there are nearly 2000. This numerical progression, though not necessarily scientific, underscores the emergence of prayer as a significant aspect in the Rabbis' teachings. In *Torah* people prayed spontaneously and from the heart, with the sacrificial system seen as the structural and appropriate mode of formal worship. By the time of the Rabbis, we see the acceptance of prayer as a substitute for the sacrificial system of worship, which collapsed with the destruction of the Temple. The Psalmists offer their understanding of this explicit substitution:

I call You, O Lord, hasten to me;

Give ear to my cry when I call You.

Take my prayer as an offering of incense,

my upraised hands as an evening sacrifice.[83]

To a certain extent, the Rabbis of the midrash and the Talmud understood that as the sacrificial system of the *Torah* was transformed, worship (*avodah),* too, shifted from sacrifice at the Temple to the worship (*avodah*) of our mouths (and of our hearts). Although this work does not attempt to address the emergence or history of liturgical prayer, it might be argued that the Rabbis turned their attention from the physical, nearly non-verbal mode of sacrifice, transforming worship to embrace the structure, the wording, the timing, and the obligations of the formal verbal act of prayer.[84]

As the life of prayer replaced the sacrificial system, the Rabbis in the Talmud, as was often the case, sought to give ancient authority, retroactively, to the relatively modern prayer structures. There is a Talmudic argument that seeks to relate the timing of the thrice daily worship structure both to the lives of the patriarchs and to the timing of the sacrifices at the Temple:

> Abraham established morning prayers, as it says, "*And Abraham arose in the morning to the place where he stood*," and "standing" refers only to the act of prayer. Isaac established afternoon prayers, as it says, "*And Isaac went out to converse in the field at evening*," and "speaking" refers only to prayer. Jacob established evening prayer, as it says, "*And he reached the place, and he slept there*," and "reaching" only refers to prayer.

[83] Psalms 141:1.
[84] For a discussion of the Rabbis' understanding of this transformation see: Stefan C. Reif, *Problems with Prayers: Studies in the Textual History of Early Rabbinic Liturgy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 166-170.

> It was also taught in accordance with Rabbi Joshua; "For what reason is the Morning Prayer said only until midday? It is because the morning sacrifice was offered only until then. For what reason is the afternoon prayer said only until evening? It is because the afternoon sacrifice was brought only until the evening. Why does the evening prayer have no limit? It is because the (sacrificial) limbs were brought throughout the entire night."[85]

Both of these historical anchors—the link to the patriarchs and the link to the Temple sacrifice—helped instill authority within the prayer structures instituted by the Rabbis. They say, in effect, that we learned to pray from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel and Leah. But that we also inherited our understanding of prayer from the worship undertaken by the priests at the Temple. Our prayers are not new and they are not unfounded; they reach back through the generations of all those who came before us.

In the Middle Ages, Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* rejects even the verbal prayers, arguing for a higher, more intellectual form of communication. At the same time, he defends the preservation of the prayer tradition as it was, in his understanding, commanded in Torah. He suggests an arc of development in understanding the mode of communication between humanity and God, acknowledging that following the transition from sacrifice to verbal prayer, "the necessity to address men in such terms as would make them achieve some representation—in accordance with the dictum of the Sages: 'The Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man'—obliged resort to predicating of God their own perfections when speaking to them."[86] According to Maimonides, human beings needed

[85] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 26b.
[86] Maimonides *Guide for the Perplexed*, I 59.

human-like sentiments and in God's graciousness these were provided, both in the Bible and in the development of our prayer traditions.

The Israelites journeyed through the desert and they received the Law. A new civilization was being established. As the people were becoming more complex, the need arose for more intricate and developed institutions to support the growth and development of the new nation. We see a shift from the nomadic lifestyle in the desert under the command of Moses (and his siblings) to a more sophisticated institutional framework.

In response, the Rabbis created an arrangement that encompassed the need for prescribed times and structures for prayers. The *tefillah* (*pll*) of the patriarchs grew into the structured prayer obligations of the rabbinic authority. Since the time of the Rabbis, there has been a debate about the relative importance of spontaneous prayers—like those of the patriarchs—as compared to the fixed prayers as meticulously outlined in the Talmud. In the current scholarly literature, the debate continues, now addressing the tension between spontaneous prayers and the fixed post-sacrificial prayers that emerged after the fall of the Temple.[87]

In his work, *Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel*, Greenberg outlines a history of this debate between scholars who feel that personal prayer has always been portrayed as "the poor man's substitute for Temple worship" and those who feel that the fixed prayer headlines merely facilitated the sharing of the yearnings of one's heart.[88] Greenberg argues that it is the combination of the two that allows us to express best where we stand before the Divine. He interprets prayer in the Bible as expressing all forms of prayer—heartfelt yearnings in the narrative recitations, as well as

[87] Kadish, *Kavvana*, 73 / Greenberg, *Biblical Prose*, 43.
[88] Greenberg, *Biblical Prose*, 42

professionally composed prayers found predominantly in the Psalms. He offers us the following from Job 11:13: *If you have directed your heart—then outspread your hands in prayer.* This text might be read as a continuation of the rabbinic debate over tension between the fixed and pre-formulated writings (*keva*) of our traditions (and their relevance in our lives) as compared to the spontaneous, internal, and unscripted yearnings of our hearts (*kavanah*).

As we progress through the books of the Bible, the sense of the *pll* verb seems to transform and mature. Prayers (*tefillot*) from the heart—as we saw with Abraham, Isaac and Moses—transformed over time into structured and rationally considered words of petition, thanksgiving, or praise. We see prayer being transformed into more formalistic petitions for such deliverables as military success,[89] change of governance,[90] rain,[91] and establishment of the Temple.[92] We also see prayers answered when offered on behalf of friends[93] and grand conversations between man and God as in the book of Job.[94] In Jeremiah, we hear God warning the prophet that his petition on behalf of the people will not be accepted:

> *As for you, do not pray (*titpalail*) for this people,*
>
> *Do not raise a cry (*rina*) of prayer (tefillah) on their behalf,*
>
> *Do not plead (*piga*) with Me;*
>
> *For I will not listen (*sh'ma*) to you.*[95]

Interestingly, Jeremiah is one of the few places where we read prayer as cry (*rina*). The import of this word and its multiple meaning as both "cry" and "joy" raise the possibility

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89 1 Samuel 7:5.
90 1 Samuel 8:6.
91 1 Kings 8:35.
92 1 Kings 8:33; 2 Chronicles 6:34.
93 Job 42:10.
94 Job 24:12.
95 Jeremiah 7:16.

that the verb might have been a linguistic marker for prayers of praise. God rejects these prayers, suspicious and vengeful against a wayward people.

This paper focuses on the narrative moments of prayer in our canon. The Psalms, as explained above, have not been considered. However, their function in developing the more structured and formal prayer motif when approaching God must be acknowledged. A full analysis of all the prayer (*pll)* moments in the text of the Book of Psalms would be a fascinating opportunity for further study.

HANNAH: THE BRIDGE FROM PERSONAL TO STRUCTURED PRAYER

In the first book of Samuel, the prayer (*pll*) of Hannah stands as a nearly perfect bridge between the prayers (*pll)* of her heart and the structured prayers in the later texts. Midrash Samuel is a Palestinian midrashic work, most likely written in the 11th century. It is a rich and insightful commentary on the book of Samuel. In the fourth chapter, there is a stunning comparison drawn among the distilling powers of the crucible for gold ore, the furnace for silver ore, and the methods that God employs in distilling the heart through the tests of the mind. The midrash opens with the following quote from Proverbs:

Fire tests the purity of the silver and the gold,

But the Lord tests the heart.[96]

The midrash draws a comparison between the purification mechanisms for gold and silver and those that God employs with respect to humankind. Prayer is understood as one of the modes by which human beings are refined, with righteous purity emerging through a life of *mitzvot*. Each person, promises the midrash, will be tested, and purified according to

[96] Proverbs 17:3.

his strength. The Rabbis focus on the uniqueness of each person's journey. God responds to each of our prayers according to the Divine will:

> There is prayer (*tefillah*) that was answered in thirty years in the case of Joseph; *And Joseph was thirty years old* (Genesis 41:46); There is prayer (*tefillah*) that was answered in three days in the case of Jonah; *Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights* (Jonah 2:1); There is the prayer (*tefillah*) in the case of Moses that was answered before the words succeeded in escaping his mouth; *God said to Moses, why do you cry out to Me?* (Exodus 14:15); But in the case of Hannah, [the prayers] were never heard [but were answered.][97]

For some, our prayers are answered only after decades of sacred living. Abraham's prayer was answered after a century, Sarah's in 90 years and, as we read in the Midrash Samuel above, Joseph's in 30 years. For others, for example, Jonah the *midrash* reminds us that it was only three days as he cried from the belly of the fish. Moses' prayer, too, received a response even as the words left his lips in a cry to God. But for Hannah, the words needed not even to be uttered before God understood and responded to the yearnings of her heart. The Rabbis in the Midrash Samuel text offer us a stunning schematic of the spectrum of response times to the pleas of our heart.

Like our fore bearers, each of us also faces trials and tests as we are called upon to endure, to wait, to learn and to accept that the answer to our prayers will come according to no schedule but that of the Divine. What was it about Hannah's prayer that, like the cry of Ishmael, caused God to hear it before it even was uttered? What was it about Abraham's relationship with God that it took a century before his prayers were answered? What does

[97] *Midrash* Samuel 1:4.

this *midrash* teach us about the arc of response times and the patience with which we must consider the blessings that we are granted. For a survivor of the *Holocaust,* the birth of a sixth great-grandchild, who was entered into the *brit* eight days after birth, but 67 years after the death of her mother at the hands of evil, teaches us of love and hope, patience and potential.

Man plans and God laughs, (*Mann tracht, und Gott lacht*) says the Yiddish aphorism, but the reality is that the timetable is not ours. As we begin to acknowledge the reality of our vulnerability, our potential for trust in, respect for, and awe of God is strengthened. Yet we balance the *mitzvot* of the heart with the *mitzvot* of the limbs as we are commanded to remain partners in the direction of our fate. R. Jochanan Ben Zakkai reminds us that if we are planting a tree and the Messiah is coming, we must plant the tree and then go and meet the Messiah.[98] We must understand ourselves as co-creators in this world, under God's eternal time frame and compassion. In addition to prayer, we must act always to participate in the care and maintenance of ourselves, of our people and of the world at large.

In the beginning of the first book of Samuel, Hannah is observed praying.[99] In a mode similar to the prayer *(atr*) that Isaac prayed for Rebekkah, Hannah, in her wretchedness over her infertility, prayed *(va yitpallel)* to *Adonai*. Eli, the priest believed that she was drunk, for "*as she kept on praying (*le hitpallel*) before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard."*[100]

Hannah petitions God and presents her case, seeking favorable judgment from the Divine and ultimately pledging/lending (*hishaltahu*, from the root *shael*, to ask) her son to

[98] Avot de'Rabbi Natan 31b.
[99] 1 Samuel 1:10.
[100] 1 Samuel 1:12-13.

God in exchange for that which she had asked (*tishaael)* of God.[101] When God answers her prayer and grants her a child, she actualizes and completes the 'sacrifice' of her child. This sacrifice might be seen in sharp contrast to Abraham's sacrifice, which was forestalled. Hannah brings her son saying,

> "*Please my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you and prayed to the Lord. It was this boy I prayed for; and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him. I, in turn hereby lend him to the Lord. For as long as he lives he is lent to the Lord*."[102]

As part of the settlement between Hannah and God, Hannah vowed to dedicate her son to the priesthood for all the days of his life.

In the next chapter of Samuel, we find a more structured prayer-poem offered by Hannah. Having left the wilderness, the Israelite society matures and the need arises for more structured worship. Monuments named House of God (*Beth-El)* are no longer sufficient for the emerging society. Priests, judges and ultimately kings begin to be appointed. We see the professionalization and the formalization of the world of prayer. Hannah, demonstrating great joy that God has answered her prayer, facilitating the birth of her (borrowed) son, offers poetically structured prayers of thanksgiving:

> *My heart exults in the Lord;*
> *I have triumphed through the Lord.*
> *I gloat over my enemies;*
> *I rejoice in Your deliverance.*
>
> *There is no Holy One like the Lord.*
> *Truly, there is none beside You;*
> *There is no rock like our God*
>
> *Talk no more with lofty pride,*
> *Let no arrogance cross your lips!*

[101] Rashi : "And I also have lent him to the Lord: like a person who lends a utensil to his master, or lends him his son to serve him." Rashi Commentary on 1 Samuel 1:28.
[102] 1 Samuel 1:26.

For the Lord is in all-knowing God;
By God all actions measured.[103]

No longer a silent outpouring of the heart, this prayer is structured: it has words and paragraphs that praise and thank the Divine. Hannah, at the time of her oath, is the first to address God as Lord of Hosts (*Adonai Tziva'ot*). In her initial prayer, she promises God a sacrifice saying, "*If You Lord of Hosts, will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant, and will remember me, and not forget, and if you will grant.…*"[104] The terms of the negotiation between Hannah and God are complex and the details of the contract explicit. Once God has fulfilled God's part, Hannah structures her prayer of thanksgiving and of praise. In Exodus *Rabbah* the *midrash* highlights the structural relevance of this rubric:

> For this reason should a man recite the prayer for redemption immediately before the *Amidah*, just as they recited the Song immediately after their [declaration of] faith and the division of the Red Sea. Just as they purified their hearts and uttered Song, for it says, *And the people feared the Lord, and they believe*d, and immediately afterwards *Then sang Moses*, so must a man first purify his heart and then pray.[105]

The Rabbis understood the need for complex prayer, for prayers that held more than one component of address. We are taught that prayers of praise and of thanksgiving must always precede petitionary prayers. In the Talmud we are taught:

> To hearken to the song (*rina*) and to the prayer (*tefillah*) – words of praise to God *Tefillah* - prayer means supplication, petitioning for

[103] 1 Samuel 2:1ff.
[104] 1 Samuel 1:11.
[105] Exodus Rabbah 22:3.

> one's needs. First one should praise God and then he should petition Him for his needs.[106]
>
> and,
>
> R. Simlai expounded: A person should always marshal praise (*shivcho)* for the Holy One, Blessed is He, and afterwards he should pray (*yitpallel*).[107]

Contemplating our approach to God—focusing first on God's greatness and praising God's capacity—helps to bring us to the correct prioritization. The three components of prayer—praise, petition and thanksgiving—play different roles in our relationship with the Divine. Prayers of praise recognize God's greatness and demonstrate our recognition and humility before God's grandeur. Prayers of thanksgiving, demonstrate our recognition of God as the source of all of our gifts. Prayers of petition, assimilate man's requests and yearnings. In the *Sifre*, the Rabbis considering Moses' prayer before his death offer an explanation of the obligations for praise before approaching God with our requests:

> And he said: *The Lord came from Sinai, and rose from Seir unto them* (Deut 33:2): Scripture shows that Moses opened (the blessing) not with the needs of Israel, but with the praise of God. This may be compared to an advocate hired by a certain individual to plead his cause. The advocate, standing on the podium, opens not with the needs of his client but with the praise of the king. Happy is the world because he is its king. Happy is the world because he is its judge. The sun shines upon us (for his sake). The moon shines upon us (for his

[106] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 31a.
[107] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 32a.

sake). The audience joins him in praising (the king). Only then does he turn to the needs of his client, and finally concludes with (repeated) praise of the king. So, too our teacher Moses opened not with the needs of Israel but with the Praise of God, as it is said, And he said: *The Lord came from Sinai. Only thereafter did he begin to speak of the needs of Israel, (as it is said,) And there was a king in Jeshurun* (Deut 33:5). Finally he concluded with the praise of God, (as it is said,) *There is none like unto God, 0 Jeshurun* (Deut. 33:26). King David also spoke first in praise of God, as it is said, *Hallelujah. Sing unto the Lord a new song* (Ps. 149:1), and only afterwards spoke in praise of Israel, (as it is said,) *For the Lord taketh pleasure in His people* (Ps. 149:4); finally he concluded with the praise of God.[108]

HANNAH: RECOGNITION OF THE SOURCE

Bachya believed that submission and humility were crucial to prayer. By disciplining ourselves to recognize our blessings, to give full acknowledgment of the extent of our gifts, and to give praise, we are more devoutly and more humbly situated as we prepare to ask. Hannah prayed from her heart; acknowledging God's perfection helped her to frame her petition.

The poignancy of Hannah's initial prayer is reflected beautifully in an aggadic story in the Talmud. Hannah, with the expression of her yearnings pleads before God, "You have made me, and You did not create a single thing in me for naught." Hannah offers the litany of

[108] *Sifre* Deuteronomy *Piska* 343

eyes to see, ears to hear, and breasts to nurse, and then pursues an explanation from God, as the Talmud continues, "In Your perfection, O God, what are these breasts to be used for, if not to nurse a child? Grant me a child that I might nurse with them. There is nothing in the schema of your creation that is not valid that is not justified, that is superfluous, please God help me to actualize this promise."[109]

In *Pesikta Rabbati* the Rabbis make a parallel argument, "If You are the Lord of hosts, and there is a Lord of Hosts above and one below, and the one above does not eat or drink or bear children…but if I am the host below, I should be eating and drinking and bearing children and eventually dying…"[110] Here the Rabbis extrapolate beyond the anatomical functionality to a concept of God's temporal perfection. The human voice cries to God, "I am finite, I am mortal, You God are infinite, You God are eternal. However, in my mortality, in my humanness, in the reality that I will not live forever, I man, should be granted the gift of bearing children, in co-creating with You." Hannah understood that her body was gifted to her in order that she might bear children, but she also understood it to be God's obligation to make this childbearing a reality.

In our own lives, we, too, might contemplate the theological implications of this presumption that God's creative power is perfect. For example, we might pray thusly: "You, God, have given me this child with special needs; how do we learn to recognize his gifts?" Or ponder in this way: "You have given me eyes, but taken my sight. You, God, have given me certain gifts, but I am not able to access them for reasons of mental illness, or physical incapacitation." Alternately, we may call out to God in this way: "I am beautiful and creative, yearning to share my life with another; I am transgendered or homosexual, please

[109] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 31b.
[110] *Pesikta Rabbati* 4.3.

God, help me to know that who I am is truly in Your image. Let me use with pride and accomplishment the parts of my body that You have created in me. Let me be fully actualized, let me reach my full potential. Even if like Hannah I do not fully articulate my yearnings, help me, O God, to fully access and use all of my gifts."

A CALL TO ACTION

In the story of Hannah in the Book of Samuel, Hannah's husband, Elkanah challenges his wife, "*Why do you cry, why do you not eat? Am I not better to you than ten sons*?"[111] Rather than allowing depression to overtake her soul, Hannah is, according to the Rabbis, encouraged by her husband to act. Why he implies don't you do something? Although different verbs are used for crying—cry (*bacha*) vs. cry out (*tza'ak*)—Elkanah's challenge to Hannah mirrors a similar comment made by God to Moses in Exodus. Standing on the shores of the sea, the Israelites, nearly paralyzed with fear, cry out to God. In response, God says to Moses, "*Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.*"[112] In both cases there is, in fact, a call to action. Ironically, however, Elkanah counsels prayer as action, while God chastises the Israelites for praying rather than moving. The intrinsic need for each of us as human beings to act, to forge a life for ourselves, and to take responsibility is crucial to our existence.

Although the Rabbis seem only to call upon Hannah to pray, this apparently passive invocation is counterbalanced in the rabbinic story (*ma'aseh)* offered in the second portion of the Midrash Samuel reading. In the name of Rabbi Akiva, a story is told about a sick man

[111] 1 Samuel 1:8.
[112] Exodus 14:15.

and a healer. The healer is chastised for attempting to heal, which counterbalances the work of God who has apparently decreed the sickness.[113] Like the scythe (think (*atr*)/pitchfork) that turns over the land, the fertilizer that supports the fertility of the land, or the water that must be provided to sustain growth, the *midrash* teaches us that without the tending of the garden by humanity together with the Divine interface, there would be nothing. The Rabbis accept God in their life and in the plan, and they counsel patience and forbearance toward the answering of our prayers. Yet, they most assuredly counsel action. *Why do you cry out to Me*? asks God, you must eat, or act, make a decision, but do not just wait on God. The tension between the acceptance of God's power, control, and grace in shaping our lives as compared with the need for action on the part of individuals remains a constant in our lives. We must approach life balancing the notion that we are both responsible for our destiny and, ultimately, vulnerable to the will of God.

AMBIGUITY TOWARD HANNAH

There is a certain sense of ambiguity in the treatment of Hannah in the Talmud. In the Babylonian Talmud the Rabbis use the experience of Hannah's prayer to structure many of the requirements for Jewish prayer in general. The Mishnah that opens this particular discussion begins with the requirement that one should not rise to pray other then with an attitude of reverence:

> Do not stand to pray except with an intentional frame of mind…R
>
> Eliezer said, "A person should always assess himself before praying, if

[113] *Midrash* Samuel 1:4.

he is able to concentrate, he should pray. If he is not, he should not pray."[114]

These statements embrace more than the halakhic requirements of the Talmud; they outline for us the fundamental integrity that one must observe when approaching the Divine. One should not rise to pray without the proper intentionality, concentration, or attention. In the Talmud, Hannah's prayer is also used as a hallmark for a discussion on silent prayer. She is cited as the one in the Bible whose silent prayers and unarticulated yearnings of the heart are heard. Hannah's prayers are paradigmatic, as described in the Talmud:

> It might be thought that one should make his voice heard during prayer. It has already been clarified otherwise through Hannah – for it is written: *But her voice was not heard*. (1 Sam 1:13)[115]

If God need not hear our words of prayer in order for them to be "heard," then what indeed constitutes prayer? Does it matter how we communicate our needs, our love, or our thanks toward God? What is it about the articulation of our needs that is of value—to us as individuals, to our community, and to God? Why does it matter that we pray? At a recent class in a nursing home, participants were invited to raise their hands if they believed that God could hear their unarticulated prayers. A stroke victim who had lost a significant level of speech as a result raised her hand and then proceeded to cry. Can God hear her prayers? What does it mean to her that they might be heard? What is it about the fulfillment of the commandments or the articulation/meditation of our needs that sanctification of the name and petition, thanksgiving and praise—both spoken and unspoken—are aspects of our lives? The

[114] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 30b.
[115] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 32b.

Rabbis frequently return to Hannah's prayers, both silent and articulated, helping us to contemplate our own conceptualization of prayer.

It is interesting to note that the Talmud also reflects ambiguity toward Hannah. The Rabbis express particular concern over the forwardness of her prayers and, in their interpretation, condemn Hannah for praying "against God" (*al Adonai*) rather than "toward God" (*el Adonai*), flinging her accusations and her demands heavenward.[116]

In Pesikta Rabbati it is reported that Hannah "threatens God," stating that she will invoke the tests of the *sotah* if God fails to meet her plea.[117] Under the rules of *sotah*, an innocent woman accused of adultery will become pregnant. Hannah threatens to compromise herself, placing herself in a position in which she might be accused of infidelity. However, because she is innocent and falsely accused, she expects that God will grant her a child. The Rabbis interpret this threat as audacious. She is purported to threaten to employ these tests so that her innocence will result in her conceiving a child, as innocent women are rewarded with children according to the laws outlined in the Talmud.[118] This story suggests Hannah considers taking an aggressive stand toward God with respect to her fertility. It is in response to this perceived "throwing" of prayers toward God that the Rabbis raise their objection.

Hannah challenges God. Yet, Hannah struggles with the Divine with a sense of truth and honesty. Is this not the story of Job? Is this not perhaps the truest form of engagement? A willingness to articulate one's anger or frustration with God's role in our lives is, in essence, a huge acknowledgement of faith. Why did You, God, let this happen? Where are You, God, in my time of trouble and tribulation? Why have You, God, in Your infinite

[116] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 31b.
[117] Pesikta Rabbati 43:4.
[118] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 32b.

power, failed to remember your servant? Where are You, God? Each time we find ourselves expressing anger at God, we also are confirming our understanding that God exists and acts in the world-at-large. When we as individuals engage in a debate or negotiation or argument with God, we confirm—through our engagement—an understanding of God's presence in the world.

In the Bible, we see that Hannah's prayers are answered. We have textual evidence that she prayed and that she was blessed with a son. However, the *midrash* offers us evidence that the actions of others also played a role in her destiny. Just as Pharaoh indirectly aids and abets Moses in the birth of the people, Peninnah, the rival of Hannah, also is understood by the *midrash* to have played a role in the birth of Hannah's child. Peninnah tortured her rival, and there is evidence in the Bible and in the *midrash* of the extent of her teasing. The Rabbis suggest that it was Peninnah's role to

> Make her (Hannah) thunder against God in prayer on her own behalf. Thereupon, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Peninnah: "Thou makest her 'thunder' against Me. As thou livest, there are no thunders that are not followed by rain. I shall remember her at once." *So the Lord remembered Hannah, and she conceived, and bore three sons and two daughters*. (1Samuel 2:21)[119]

In the case of Rebekkah and Isaac, the Rabbis suggest that there was a unique symbiosis in each wanting to partner with the other and with God in co-creation. Isaac is reported to have prayed that his children might be through this righteous woman. As discussed in the previous chapter, this prayer parallels Rebekkah's prayer that her children too might be through Isaac.[120] In the case of Hannah, Elkanah tries to comfort Hannah, "*Am*

[119] Pesikta Rabbati, *Piska* 43.
[120] Genesis *Rabbah* 63:5

I not more devoted to you than ten sons?"[121] Elkanah's love and prayer for Hannah, communicated by the Rabbis in Midrash Samuel, expands on the plea (*atr*) of Isaac: not only should the children that might be born be through my co-creation with this woman, but also they should become like the children of Boaz and Ruth.[122] Elkanah's prayer not only resonates with the promise and the potential of the prayers of the matriarchs and patriarchs, but goes further. He articulates the historical mantle of the patriarchs and then calls upon the messianic potential of the Jewish people. When Hannah's prayers are answered, Samuel is born. Ultimately, Samuel is instrumental in facilitating the transition to establishing a king for the people of Israel. Samuel is so named because, as Hannah explains in the biblical text, God heard (*sh'ma El*) her prayer.[123] With reference to Elkanah's prayer, the Rabbis go beyond the promise to Abraham and the patriarchs. Elkanah prays for a child that will be like the children of Boaz and Ruth, that is, in the ancestral line of the messianic promise of King David. Here we note a progression beyond the patriarchs to the full potential of Jewish peoplehood and ultimately to the messianic age.

When we read of the success of Hannah's prayer, we are invited to consider the merciful side of God that blessed Hannah with the child that she so desperately desired. Her husband offered the fullness of his human love, which was, in fact, all he could give to her; he could not make her fertile. Like Eve, who knew her husband and acquired (*kaniti*) a child with God, so it was with God's hand that Elkanah, as his name reflects—God (*el*) and acquired (*kanah*)—acquired a child with Hannah.[124] Yet Hannah recognized that there is no life, no potential, no present, and no future without God. Even as she struggles with

[121] 1 Samuel 1:8.
[122] *Midrash* Samuel 6:3.
[123] 1 Samuel 1:20.
[124] Genesis 4:1.

infertility before she conceives, miserable in herself (*marat nefesh*), she presents her case, negotiates an offer, and awaits God's judgment.[125] Ultimately, she gives birth to her child, then remembers God in her joy. She praises God, recognizing God's majesty and God's grace. She models for us the transition from the pleading (*atr*) appeals of the heart to the more sophisticated and complex prayers (*pll*) that are spoken, sung, and ultimately recorded and held for others, reflecting the prescribed order for humanity to seek judgment before God. Samuel ultimately serves as the embodiment of the articulated presence of the Divine. As the people move from the patriarchal, rural tribal system to the more urban, institutional society, they begin to cry for a king and for a more structured way of living. Samuel, this child acquired through Hannah (grace) and Elkanah (God and acquired) lays the groundwork for this transition.

[125] 1 Samuel 1:10.

CHAPTER 3

THE CRY FROM THE DEPTH OF OUR SOUL

He who answered Abraham on Mt. Moriah, May He answer you and hearken to the voice of your crying on this day. Blessed are You, the Redeemer of Israel.

Mishnah Ta'anit 2:4

מי שענה את אברהם בהר המוריה
הוא יענה אתכם וישמע בקול צעקתכם היום הזה
ברוך אתה ה' גואל ישראל

THE CRY FROM THE DEPTH OF OUR SOUL

In his book, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, Joseph Soloveitchik outlines the three aspects of prayer: petitional, hymnal and thanksgiving, offering a clear and piercing understanding of their roles in the human spiritual enterprise:

> The petitional, hymnal and thanksgiving aspects of prayer portray three experiential conceptions and spiritual movements; the conception of *mi-ma'akkim* (*de profundis*), the crisis cry from the depths; the concept of *kevod Elohim* (*majestas Dei*), the majesty of God; and the concept of *hesed Elohim* (*caritas Dei*), the grace of God. Petition flows from an aching heart which finds itself in existential depths; hymn emerges from an enraptured soul gazing at the *mysterium magnum* of creation; thanksgiving is sung by the person who has attained, by the grace of God, redemption.[126]

The trilateral root צ-ע–ק (*tza'ak)* in the *qal* means "to cry" or "to cry out," (often for help, when one is in distress or in need). For our work in this chapter, "From the depths" (*mi-ma'akim/de profundis*) categorizes the angst and the pain with which each of the incidents of *tza'ak* might be identified. In most cases, it is an audible cry in the narrative. In pain, confusion, and terror, the Israelites, Moses, and each and every human being cries out to God. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to identify a moment in our life when, from the depths of our soul, we cried out or, in the worst case, failed to cry out to God. This shrieking sound (one I remember hearing from a woman who had just learned of her sister's

[126] Joseph B. Soleveitchik, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer* (City: Publisher, 2003), 28.

death by suicide) is an undeniable marker of pain. It is pain from the depths (*de profundis*), from which prayer is birthed:

> *Out of the depths (*mi-ma'akkim*) I have called Thee, Adonai;*
> *Lord, hear my voice!*
> *Let your ears be attentive*
> *to my voice in supplication.*[127]

From the lowest place of my being, I turn to You and cry. In this psalm, although the verb used to call is *kara*, rather than *tza'ak*, the implication is consistent: a call to heaven, a cry from earth that my voice might be heard. Soloveitchik argues that this prayer is the truest prayer and, indeed, it comes from a place of unconscious and unpremeditated inner angst.

BLOOD CRIES FROM THE GROUND

In looking at the use of the verb to cry (*tza'ak,)* it is interesting to note that the first use of the verb in the Torah is found just after the death of Abel, in the beginning of the book of Genesis.[128] God demands an explanation from Cain, "*What have you done? Hark your brother's blood cries out (tzo'akim) to Me from the ground*!" The blood, irrefutable in its presence, cries out to God. The blood—the most basic of human components and like the blood later that serves as the place maker of the *brit*, the life force staining the ground—is evidence of the first murder of passion, crying out (*tzo'akim*) for an explanation:

> Even so, *The voice of thy brother's blood cries out against Me*. It [the blood] could not ascend above, because the soul had not yet ascended thither; nor could it go below, because no man had yet been buried there; hence the blood lay spattered on the trees and the stones.[129]

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[127] Psalm 130:1.
[128] Genesis 4:10.
[129] Genesis *Rabbah* 22:9.

This *midrash* from Genesis Rabbah depicts the evidence calling out to God, neither above nor below the ground, demanding an explanation. Just as God demanded a response from Cain, so, too, does the physical evidence itself cry for a response. In most cases the word (*tza'ak*) refers to a human cry. Although it is the people of Israel or other biblical characters who cry out to God, we are helped here to understand the primitive and unrestrained nature of this cry of distress. We see a similar use of the word (*tza'ak*) by the people when they cry out to Pharaoh over the hunger during the famine:

> *And when the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh, for bread; and Pharaoh said to the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do."*[130]

In a continuation of the *midrash* in Genesis Rabbah, we read a story about two athletes wrestling on the ground. The Rabbis teach us that the king had an opportunity to stop the fight. One of the athletes, realizing that he is about to be killed, calls out to the king, but the king chooses not to intervene. Here again, the spilt blood calls for an explanation. Where were You, God? How did you, Sovereign of the universe, fail to intervene? Why did You allow this to happen? From the depths (*de profundis*) of pain and hurt and passion we cry out to God. The pray-er often is unclear about why God may not have intervened, asking why God has not raised a hand to intercede, to avoid that which has been allowed to wreck havoc on their lives. The list is infinite: the death of a loved one, the death of a child, the Holocaust, a tsunami. Although it is beyond the scope of this work to consider the existence of evil in the world and where God may be in response to evil, it is the role of prayer, the need for prayer, and the essence of prayer in these moments of complete and utter pain that will be considered.

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[130] Genesis 41:55.

ESAU CRIES TO HIS FATHER

When Isaac blesses Jacob, Esau, the rightful recipient of the blessing, bursts into a wild and bitter sobbing (*tza'ak tza'akah gedolah*) and says to his father, "*Bless me too father.*"[131] Rabbi Shira Stern teaches her own modern *midrash* on the excruciating pain suggested by this verse. "Are you, Father, suggesting that your love is so limited that you hold no blessing for me?"[132] Her teaching rejects the concept of finite parental love, expressing the reality of the elasticity of love in the world, which parallels the infinite nature of the love of God toward humanity. Employing the infinitive absolute, the Hebrew grammatical marker for intensification, the root of the word to cry out (*tza'ak tza'akah gedolah*) is repeated in Esau's cry, which embodies these questions: How can your love and commitment be so limited? How can it be so unfairly bestowed, so narrow in its allocation? "Father," cries Esau in the *midrash*, "don't you have a blessing for me?" So, too, each of us cries out in our own distress to a parent, a lover, the Divine: Do you not have sufficient love to rescue me, to heal me, to solve this issue in my life, or to love me, too? Is your love for the children of your first marriage so overriding that you are limited in what you have to offer our children? God, is it necessary for us to hate and wish ill on the other so that you might have sufficient love for us and for our people? We petition God, we demand a response, sometimes neglecting to recognize the gifts that we have been granted. We moan and whine and complain, failing to recognize some of our simplest and most profound blessings. We fail to recognize the alternative economics of *mitzvot*, to realize that the love

[131] Genesis 27:34.
[132] Hebrew Union College -Jewish Institute of Religion, Class notes R. Shira Stern, 2005.

of a partner for his grown children or the love of the Divine does not diminish the love available to us.

CRYING OUT IN THE MISHNAH
MAY HE ANSWER YOU AND HEARKEN TO THE VOICE OF YOUR CRYING THIS DAY

Soloveitchik uses his analysis of the liturgical structure of the *Amidah* to consider the significance of distress in shaping our prayers.[133] He sees the middle 13 petitions as prayers in response to distress (*tzarah).* In Soloveitchik's thinking, this distress is delineated into two distinct forms: external, objective, impersonal pain and internal, existential, personal pain. The traditional public distress is characterized by illness, famine, war, poverty, slavery and, ultimately, death. This public, more objective tragedy reflects communal pain and is addressed as a society, as a people respond to a struggle using the structure and reality of communal prayer. In contrast, the existential and personal angst within a person's soul is private, reflecting matters of the heart and the deepest internal searching. These struggles involve deliberations on such issues as destiny, fate, and loneliness.

In the Mishnah[134] the Rabbis outline the prayer structure for fast days. These days were historically set aside to commemorate an episode of public distress. Fast days often were established in petition for rain, in memory of an historical event, and, on occasion, to encourage the people to repent. The text of this Mishnah addresses the biblical circumstances in which the people cried out to God and how their lament was heard. There is then a refrain in the text—for each moment of biblical prayer, the text petitions the God that heard that biblical prayer—to hear and respond to today's prayers. Ultimately, the people bless this

[133] The *Amidah* or *Shmoneh Esrai* is one of two primary daily prayers in Judaism. It is composed of 18 (*shmonei esrai* - or 19) benedictions that are organized into three categories: praise, petition and thanksgiving.
[134] Mishnah *Taanit 2:4*

God, who heard and remembered their petition, and who will answer us, too, in our distress. The following refrain is then repeated throughout the Mishnah: "May that God answer you in your crying on this day. Blessed are You, the God who acts with so much compassion." The people express their understanding of God and God's ability to hear our prayers from the depth of our distress and to answer them. First, the refrain is applied to the prayer of Abraham: "He Who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah, May He answer you and hearken to the voice of your crying (*tza'achem*) on this day, Blessed are You, the Redeemer of Israel." This prayer hearkens to the full pledge by God to Abraham. All the reward (*zechut)* earned by the patriarch is called upon to bring blessings to this generation, in this particular moment of pain. As the inheritors of the covenant (*brit*) and as partners with God, the people pray that their prayers will be heard by God the redeemer of the people of Israel. This prayer is resonant with the public prayer discussed by Soloveitchik. Although we come before God as individuals, as members of the covenant, we are granted a certain weight, a gravitas, in our communal offering.

The pattern is then repeated through the description of a series of communal events. In each example, the people cried out to God after which the text reflects God's recognition of the cries and the ways God hears and responds to these cries. There is a progression from the Redeemer of Israel on Mt. Moriah to the One whom remembers the forgotten at the shore of the sea. The text beseeches God: "As you remembered our ancestors who were slaves to Pharaoh and oppressed in Egypt, may you too remember us. You, the One who remembers the forgotten, praised must be You, the God of redemption, the God of remembering."

The beseeching continues: "God, as you redeem the people and remember the forgotten, may You hear the sounding of our *shofarot*." Using this symbol of our request for

forgiveness, we send its sound into the universe, hoping that You will respond. The text then addresses God as the One who knows each of us—our fate and our loneliness—urging God to remember that when God loses, often it is we, the children of God, who succeed or benefit from the granting of mercy on the part of the Divine. The Mishnah—recognizing God as the forgiving One, the One who allows for *teshuvah* and all the magnanimity and grace that this implies, the One who heard and answered the calling of the *shofar*, the One who answered the call of the people's distress in that time—might also respond to our cry of distress, our need for repentance at the sounding of our *shofar*.

The comparative text continues: "May You, the One who saved the people at the shores of the sea and remembered those who were forgotten, the One who heard the sound of the *shofar*, the One who saved the Israelites from the Philistines, the epic Savior in the times of battle, hear our prayers at this time. As the One who heard the cries from the depths (*tza'akah*) in the time of Samuel so, too, might You hear our cry. The One who hears the public cry of distress in historic times of battle, remember us, Your people, now."

"May You, God, in all your greatness, appreciate that at times we might be lost, we might not have the ability to recognize You or Your greatness or the essential reality of Your unity. May You, the One who answered Elijah's prayers at Mt. Carmel, the One who rescued the wavering Israelites when they failed to make a decision between God and Baal, hear our prayer. Here, the Rabbis enter the space of Soloveitchik's more personal and existential cries of despair. We, too, at times find ourselves lost, unable to find You, to understand Your existence, or the reality of your unity. So, as you answered Elijah who prayed to You, please, God, answer me so that I might help this people.[135] So, too, as you

[135] 1 Kings 18:37 *Answer me, O Lord, answer me, and this people shall know that You are the Lord God, and You have turned their hearts backwards.*

answered Elijah, might you answer our call and cry in this time, You who answers prayer (*tefillah*), so, too, answer us.'

The Rabbis then turn to Jonah in the belly of the fish. From the communal cry of the children of Abraham at Mt. Moriah, to the doubters at Carmel, God answered the people's prayers. Now they call to the God who answered Jonah, who fled and rejected God, as he cried from the belly of the fish. Even he who actively rejected God and God's power is, in his time of trouble (*tzarah*), heard and answered by God. The text seems to say, "God, as You answered Jonah in his time of deepest confusion, his darkest most submerged moment of loss and of trouble, might You hear, too, the voice of our crying on this day."

Finally, the Rabbis come to David and Solomon, describing God as the One Who brings compassion upon all the earth. Having offered a litany of moments when God hears the prayers of our foreparents and recognizing the role of David and Solomon as symbols of the ultimate messianic potential through their building of Jerusalem, the Rabbis bless God, the One Who will bring compassion upon all the Land. Continuing the progression from Mt. Moriah to Jerusalem, and from the redeemer of Israel to the One who ultimately will bring compassion to all the Land, the Rabbis offer this historical reference so that God will hear our prayers too and redeem us: "Blessed are You that You might hear our crying on this day, in the time of our distress and promise us redemption in the time to come."

The Mishnah vacillates between the cries of the people of Israel as a whole and the individual cries of those who have lost their compass, those whose interior faith has been challenged or even broken. God hears our communal pain on this fast day, and God hears our continuous personal pain as we struggle to understand and to know the Divine. The yearning

and need of humanity to understand the existence and the unity of God is perhaps the private cry from the depths.

The Talmud indirectly contemplated this relationship between communal pain and private pain in its consideration of the efficacy of prayer:

> Why do they go out to the open space [of the city]?
>
> R. Hiyya b. Abba said: In order to express thereby [the idea], 'We have prayed in private, but we have not been answered; we will [therefore] humiliate ourselves in public.'[136]

The Rabbis—perhaps suspicious, perhaps daunted by the one-on-one relationship with God—understood that a communal call to God held greater power and greater potential. When we pray in community, we as a people have access to our God on a different plane, from a different reference point than that which we as individuals might warrant. Mt. Moriah, the shores of the sea and Jerusalem, all that these represent in some essence accrue to us when we, even we of smallest worth, call out to You. The cry from the depth, as described by Soloveitchik, may be personal or communal, but the power of communal prayer even in times of private trauma holds great value and potential. The distinction between these two types of prayer is potentially blurred when we contemplate the latent power of their interconnectedness.

SO MOSES CRIED OUT TO *ADONAI*, O GOD, PRAY HEAL HER[137]

"Oh God, pray heal her!" (*al na refa na la!)*" Moses cried out (*va yitzak*) on behalf of his sister. Miriam had been struck with a skin disease. In a deeply personal response,

[136] Babylonian Talmud *Taanit* 15b.
[137] Numbers 12:13.

Moses prays these strikingly simple words, which form the basis of our current daily prayers for healing. Such simple words—"*Oh God, pray heal her!*"—are consistent with Soloveitchik's concept of illness; not the grand illness suffered by the Egyptians, but the personal and private illness of a sister. Moses, the human being, calls out to his God: "Please heal her; now!" The Rabbis debate the length of this prayer, suggesting that perhaps it was short so that it would not appear that he prayed more extensively for his own sister than for others.[138] Perhaps they worried that a more extensive prayer for Miriam might be viewed as an abuse of power. Or, as some Rabbis suggest, he must have shortened his prayer because his sister lay ill and praying over her was insufficient; more immediate and active participation in her care was warranted. The tension between prayer and action will be explored further below.

We, too, offer this prayer. Debbie Friedman, *z'l*, transformed the approach of an entire generation toward the Divine around matters of failing health. We regularly pray: "Please God, heal our loved one who is ill, afford them the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit, the strength to make their lives a blessing," in spite of the weight of the challenges in their lives.[139] This prayer movingly offered in the middle of the Torah service, at the center of our worship experience reflects the transformative power of Debbie Friedman's profound understanding of the potential for healing. Here again, the prayer plays a dual role: it is not only a personal call, a cry to God, but also a communal call as noted by William Cutter who wrote,

> Debbie Friedman understood the dual direction of the *Misheberach* prayer. For some people–usually–and for all people some of the time,

[138] Talmud Bavil *Berachot* 34a; *Sifre* Numbers *pisqa*105.
[139] *Misheberach*, Debbie Freidman,

> it is a prayer for Divine intervention: "God, do something!" For others and almost all of the time, it is more a communal and public affirmation of hope—binding people together in a sharing of each individual's particularity.[140]

Thus, the power of the worship experience, the response by the community to the cry of the individual according to Cutter carries an efficacy in itself. In this case, the community is experiencing a real and valid sense of value in their prayer experience.

Moses, according to *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, drew a circle around himself and "beseeched mercy on her behalf saying, 'I shall not stir from here until Miriam, my sister, is healed.' *And it is said, Heal her now O God, I beseech Thee."* [141] Moses' prayer for Miriam is not only a prayer for his sister, but also a prayer for Miriam, the prophetess, one of the lights of the Jewish people, the cupbearer of Israel's potential. In the *midrash*, Miriam's well represents the source of water for all Israel.[142] She was, in essence, the source of their living waters. When she died, so cites the Midrash, the source also disappeared. In Numbers *Rabbah* we learn that the people waited for Miriam to be healed before moving forward. Miriam was more than just a sister to Moses; her vision and her being were instrumental in moving the people from slavery to freedom:

> And the Lord said:...let her be shut up without the camp seven days, and after that she shall be brought in again...and the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again (Num. 12:14). Since it is the

[140] William Cutter, "A Prayer for Healing: The Misheberach," *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* 41, no. 681 (2011): 4-5.
[141] Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan chapter 9 (version A)
[142] Numbers *Rabbah* 1:2.

> case that the people [halted and journeyed] with the *Shekinah*, it follows that the *Shekinah* waited for her [i.e., Miriam].[143]

Moses' prayer was for his sister, but also perhaps for the people. The presence of the Divine (the *Shekinah*) waited until Miriam was returned from outside of the camp and the people could continue their journey. Moses' prayer went beyond his sister to the hope and energy and potential for freedom that Miriam embodied. Was Miriam guilty of slander? If so, did the community need to learn this? Was she a model for the potential for healing? Although we cannot be sure, we do know that Moses prayed for his sister and demonstrated—perhaps like all our prayers do—that the future of the people is rooted in the capacity to heal. As individuals, as families, as a community, and as a people, we all need to know that our prayers embody this potential for healing.

Like the Rabbis, we continue to marvel at this aspect of the power of prayer. Regarding the power that the community brings to our quiet and private appeal for compassion, the Rabbis in Exodus *Rabbah* shared the following:

> R. Abba said: When Israel prays, you do not find them all praying at the same time, but each assembly prays separately, first one and then another. When they have all finished, the angel appointed over prayers collects all the prayers that have been offered in the all the Synagogues, weaves them into garland and places them upon the head of God….You will find that a mortal man cannot grasp the conversation of two people speaking at the same time, but with God it is not so. All pray before Him and he understands and receives all their prayers.[144]

[143] Leviticus *Rabbah* 15:8
[144] Exodus *Rabbah* 21:4

At a recent fourth-grade Shabbat, a couple who rarely attends synagogue shared the name of their brother-in-law during the *Misheberach*. This man had recently suffered a heart attack, but the news had not been shared in the community. It is quite likely that this news would not have been shared organically (except perchance on Facebook), underscoring the communal potential of prayer.[145] Even in the age of social networks, the private matters of illness might not be broadcast over the ether, leaving many, especially senior citizens who have increasing numbers of ailing friends, with no way to communicate their pain. The healing value of shared knowledge and compassion is in itself a reflexive answer to the prayer. It carries us beyond the pain of our cry (*tza'ak*) to the wonder of God's power to heal, enabling us to comfort the family of the ailing through both a communal and a personal call for help. As the Rabbis suggested, it is perhaps in the very multiplicity of these disparate prayers that our prayers are indeed heard and answered. Cutter continues in his assessment of the power of the Friedman adaptation of the *Misheberach*, "Even the well-considered distinction between "curing" (what doctors do) and "healing" (what we all have to do) emerges as more important through her creative hand."[146] When we pray for healing, it is not only a cure that we are seeking, but rather an aspect of wholeness as we begin to accept the reality of our lives. Often we are entering a liminal place where lives have been changed forever by a precipitating attack, discovery of a debilitating disease, a failed surgery, or a driver who did not stop after he hit your partner, who was riding his bicycle. As a result, our own bodies or minds, or those of our loved ones have been altered. How do we engage with God in this new reality? How can prayer heal in the face of a failure to cure?

[145] The use of social networking to develop communal prayer might be the subject of a later paper.
[146] Cutter, "Prayer for Healing," 5.

The Rabbis understand Moses to be compassionate in his prayer for his sister; he knew and understood her pain:

> Moses can be compared to a warrior who once had a chain [of punishment] around his neck of which he was later freed. Subsequently he observed the chain placed on the neck of another, and he began to cry. On being asked: "Why do you cry?" he answered: "You indeed do not know, but I know what suffering it causes lying there, for once the chain was on my neck and I know what pain it gave me."[147]

Do we need to feel the pain that others are experiencing in order to pray on their behalf? How do the challenges that we face in our own lives influence our ability to understand, to comfort, to pray, to help in the process of healing. There is no room in this study to analyze the theology of suffering, but the reality of the power of compassion linked to personal experience and pain must never be ignored. The Rabbis wrote in Exodus Rabbah:

> Pharaoh's drawing nigh was better for Israel than a hundred fasts and prayers. Why? Because when the Egyptians pursued after them, the Israelites were so afraid and raised their eyes heaven wards and repented and prayed, as it says "*And the Children of Israel cried out unto the Lord*."[148]

Is this a rationalization? What potential value lies in how we relate to the world around us, even if this world is filled with evil and even if it requires us to integrate and address challenging and oppressive realities? In the Bible, we see how the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the role of Peninnah in Hannah's prayers changed the reality of our lives in the communal sense. What we do with the pain and suffering in our own lives effects both our prayer life and the reality of the lives we lead. How does pain speak truth to our relationship

[147] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 6:13.
[148] Exodus *Rabbah* 21:5.

with God? How we relate to that which hurts us and how we engage with it does much to define the lives that we live.

IF YOU MISTREAT THEM, I WILL HEED THEIR OUTCRY AS SOON AS THEY CRY OUT TO ME[149]

In Soloveitchik's understanding of public stress leading to a cry for help, poverty is listed as one of the communal catalysts. We as a people have known poverty, we as a people have known persecution, and we as a people have known systemic genocide. We were strangers in a strange land and much of what girds the social justice calling of our people is reflected in the prophetic call to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The statements taught by God through Moses in the Torah foundationally support the prophetic call. From Mt. Sinai God teaches that if you forget what is right, by mistreating those incapable of providing for themselves, you will be held responsible. If you forget your obligations and they cry out (*tza'ak*) to Me, I will heed their call (*sh'ma esh'ma tza'akoto*). The clarity of the statement is unyielding and unapologetic: *"If the poor cry to Me," says God, "I will respond, I will answer."* They will not be ignored.

The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael delineates even the slightest infringement as warranting a response from God, "whether a severe or a light affliction."[150] There is no tolerance, according to the Rabbis, of mistreatment of the poor, the widow, or the orphan. This reality endures: this year, the number of children living below the poverty level in this country alone will continue to rise to unfathomable levels, and we often cry out to God in our

[149] Exodus 22:22.
[150] Joshua L. Moss, *Midrash and Legend: Historical Anecdotes in the Tannaitic Midrashim* (Piscataway; Gorgias Press, 2004), 132.

plight. Where is God in answering their cry (and ours)? How do we continue in relationship with God when this cry appears unanswered and when the poor, the underrepresented, and the unemployed begin to take to the streets. What then of the inequality? How do we bring this tragedy, this pain, this cry to God? How do we learn to hear God's voice even in the face of sustained starvation and unending poverty?

WHY DO YOU CRY OUT TO ME?
TELL THE ISRAELITES TO GO FORWARD

"'Why' asks God, 'do you cry to Me?' Just tell the Israelites to go forward."[151] The enormity of this proposition, the reality of God responding to prayer in this way is startling. The Rabbis wrestle extensively with this statement. "Do not just stand there praying" commands God, "just ACT!" You, too, are responsible for your life. The covenant is a two-sided contract: co-creation and joint responsibility for your life. Theologically, this might be considered the relationship between will and grace. "You have obligations," God tell us. "Do not just stand there. Go forward as did Abraham in *Lech Lecha*." God continues: "Indeed, I, God, may or may not respond to your cry, but we are each responsible for acting upon our lives." It is possible that rather than respond, God may wish to question us: "*Why do you cry out to Me (*ma tzaak alai*)*?" On this matter, Zornberg writes:

> When God silences Moses, "Why (*Mah*) are you crying out to Me? "He makes clear that what is needed is not prayer but action: "Let them travel on…" (14:15). One movement of faith is better than a thousand words of prayer.[152]

[151] Exodus 14:15.
[152] Avivah G. Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 203.

She recognizes the need for action, to internalize a confidence in God's presence and to act upon this confidence. However, Zornberg is troubled with God's response of silencing Moses and the people: "Why do you cry out to Me?"

Moses prays and God responds, but does God really answer Moses' prayer? In the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, there is an extensive consideration of the meaning of God's response to Moses at the shore of the sea: "*Why do you cry out to Me*?" Initially, the text argues that the there is no reason to cry out to God because the God that made dry land for Adam, just one man, will surely do the same for the entire community of Israel. God further promised Abraham longevity and a future for his descendants. This promise was earned on the merit of Abraham and will, of course, be fulfilled. Therefore, why do you need to cry out to Me now? A parable is offered about a father who is angry at his son and is begged by a friend to relent. The father responds in the *midrash*, "Why do you cry to me on behalf of my son, I have already reconciled with him?"[153] Do we hear in God's voice a presumption of a lack of faith? Should we always believe that God will be with us? On what basis might this faith be established?

The text then teaches us that in their incessant complaining and in their inquiry of God ("*Why did you take us out of Egypt only to let us die here*?), the people have indicated a loss of faith.[154] Let them first remove the evil thoughts from their hearts, and then perhaps their prayer will be heard. If we agree to the premise that God alone might know the truth of our hearts, it is by definition impossible to lie to God. This premise addresses one of the fundamental realities of prayer. What happens to our prayers when the words that we pray may or may not coalesce with the truth in our hearts? Until the two are reconciled, the prayer

[153] Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Massekta d'Beshallah* chapter 3.
[154] Exodus 16:3.

that is produced does not reflect the prayer in our hearts. Perhaps this process of reconciliation is inherent in the purpose of prayer itself. This ambiguity may or may not be known to us, but say the Rabbis, it is known to God. Contrasting a prayer relationship with God with a relationship between two men, the Rabbis observe:

> Unless a mortal hears the plea that a man can put forward he is not able to give judgment. With God, however, it is not so; before a man speaks, He already knows what is in his heart…He understands even before the thought has been created in man's mind. [155]

Perhaps part of the process of prayer is reaching a place where we are honest with ourselves. In Exodus *Rabbah* the text goes even farther. God hears and responds to our prayers, perhaps like Hannah or Ishmael, before they are ever formed into words:

> Wherefore criest Thou unto Me? It is written, *And it shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer* (Is 65:24). This is to show that he who fulfills the will of God and prays with true earnestness is heard both in this world and in the world to come.[156]

The Rabbis saw true faith in God and honesty in our prayers as the defining factors in God's response to them. God in effect says, "I will do it for Abraham, for the sake of Joseph's bones, but never, never lose faith in My power." [157] "You," says the *midrash*, "are under my authority, the sea is under my authority and I have made you (Moses) commander over it. and "The faith with which they believed in Me is deserving that I should divide the sea for

[155] Exodus *Rabbah* 21:3.
[156] Exodus *Rabbah* 21:2.
[157] Both for the promise to Abraham under the *brit* and that the sea will be split for the sake of the bones of Joseph, are in fact place markers/ commitments to the promise for future generations. See Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Massekta d'Beshallah* chapter 4.

them."[158] One must acknowledge the unlimited nature of God's power and the inherent limits of our control over our own lives in order for the prayer to be meaningful. Yet, we are asked to co-create, to act, to take responsibility. How do these things co-exist? How can we reconcile these tensions? We must in essence fully integrate our powerlessness in the face of God and our ultimate responsibility for the trajectory of our lives in order for our prayers truly to be answered. God, says the *midrash*, needs no urging for the matter of his children, and that He is responding to them as He has already heard their cry. In response to their belief in God, the sea will be split. Tell them to go forward, for their prayer has already been heard.

There is a discussion at the beginning of the *midrash* in Mekhilta, about the times when prayer should be shortened, as Moses shortened his prayer for Miriam:

> God then said to Moses, My children are in distress, the sea forming a bar and the enemy pursuing, and you stand so long praying? Moses said before Him: What then should I be doing? Then He said to him "Lift thou up thy rod," etc. – you should be exalting, glorifying and praising uttering songs of laudation, adoration and glorification, of thanksgiving and praise to Him in whose hands are the fortunes of war.[159]

Once again the Rabbis introduce the requirement to acknowledge and to praise, as well as to petition. The Rabbis acknowledge that you must give homage to the source of your potential. This is not a matter strictly of *halakhic* requirements, but speaks to the reality of faith. Unless we acknowledge and profoundly accept the power of the Divine, and thus are

[158] Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Massekta d'Beshallah*, chapter 4.
[159] Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Massekta d'Beshallah* chapter 4.

inclined to praise and give thanks to the source of all that is in our lives, the petitions of our hearts can never come from a place of complete truth. Yet, ambiguity is real, acknowledged and acceptable. How do we—as thinking and rational human beings imbued with doubt—learn to turn to God to seek guidance in the deepest hours of our own confusion? How do we use the obligations to offer praise and appreciate the gifts in our lives to keep us in relation with God so that the cries and confusion and even the doubts of our hearts might be heard?

Zornberg reads the Israelites' railings against God, their failures to acknowledge the grand graciousness of God's largess and failure to appreciate God as the source of all as commensurate with the "zigzags" of their journey. Stressing the argumentation, refutation, challenge and rejection, the Torah reflects the reality of a relationship with God that ebbs and flows. Like all relationships, this is one that requires honest, laborious, and often painful work. As Zornberg writes, "Their crooked route into the wilderness gives them, paradoxically, a freedom to think and to ask their subversive and sarcastic questions. It gives them outrageous freedom to zigzag, not only geographically but also intellectually and emotionally."[160]

The path 'zigs and zags' and yet we continue to pray. We struggle with our failures of faith—our moments of deepest darkest despair. In some cases, we turn to God in these moments in the same ways that the people of Israel cried (*tzo'akim*) to God. Others, in their deepest moments of anguish, turn away from God. (Note in this regard, the "Death of God" theology following the Holocaust.) In Genesis *Rabbah*, we learn of the Rabbis' understanding that God allowed for infertility so that women would continue to pray.[161] They understood the darkest hours of our lives as the catalyst for turning to God. In chapter

[160] Zornberg, *Rapture, 204*
[161] Genesis *Rabbah* 49:4.

14 of Exodus, the Israelites are at the edge of their potential, with the enemy pursuing them, and the sea before them. Seeing their predicament, the people and Moses cry to You, "Where are You and why do You say, '*Why do you cry out to Me*?'" It is as if the Israelites' are asking: "What is it, God, that you want us to do in response to this catastrophe? How can we be expected to go on? What acceptance of reality is necessary before we can return to You? What ceding of control needs to occur before we can once again praise Your name?"

In the Talmud there is an aggadic story about the death of Rabbi Akiva in martyrdom before the Romans.[162] In a typical eclipsing of time, the Rabbis describe a visit by Moses to the classroom of Rabbi Akiva. They report a conversation between God and Moses over the death of Akiva. Moses, referring to Akiva's untimely death at the hands of the Romans, says "Is this the reward that you give this brilliant man?" "Silence," says God. "How can you know what was in his heart, when in the *viahavta* he prayed with all his heart and with all his soul." Perhaps this is the greatest moment of accomplishment for Akiva. "Silence," says God to Moses. "You cannot know what was in his heart or what, indeed, he wanted from this death."

We say, "Help me, God, to accept what it is that is before me." Perhaps accepting where we are and reframing it is part of the power of God and prayer. Perhaps in this transformative process—somewhere in the acceptance, of my illness, my lot, my failure, my alcoholism, my dependence, my sadness, even my death—in accepting the reality of my situation, I might find light. If Soloveitchik is right, perhaps the profoundest prayers come from the moments of deepest despair and perhaps commingled in that despair is a moment of acceptance. We cannot know God's way, but if God's way is to ask, "Why do you cry out to

[162] Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 29a.

Me?" then perhaps it is our responsibility to take all the human gifts that we have been given and act. And, perhaps in doing so, we will find that, like the children of Israel who trusted God and entered into the sea, we, too, are safe on dry land.

The weaning process is painful yet symbiotic. As a parent, it is painful to watch your child fall as she takes her first steps. It is painful, yet necessary, for us to let our children experiment and make mistakes. Children indeed need to learn independence and freedom in order to grow into strong, self-sufficient adults. Yet, when they cry out to you, their parent, from the depths of their hearts, you must be there to help them through. As they experiment, learning to give them space to fall and asking them in fact, "Why do you cry out to me?' allows our children to grow and to become self reliant. Perhaps this is what God meant when the Rabbis suggested that He said, "I already have responded to the needs of My children."[163] Letting them fall in a supportive and loving environment, allows them to hone their muscle memory to engage with God on their own terms—questioning, seeking, crying out and ultimately addressing the reality of their lives. Each of us holds the potential to explore our own strengths and weakness and to engage with God in reaching toward the most sacred and profound possibilities in our own lives.

[163] Exodus *Rabbah* 21:1

CHAPTER 4

CROSSING: A CALL FOR GRACE

R. Levi said: Abraham said to God: Master of the Universe, if it is due to me that I should have children, then give them to me, and if not, give them to me for mercy sake.

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:7

א"ר לוי אמר לפניו רבש"ע אם מתבקש לי בדין שיהיו לי בנים
תן לי ואם לאו ברחמים תתן לי

A CALL FOR GRACE

The first set of prayers that we considered involved pleading (*atr*) with God to provide for us, often on the basis of accrued or inherited merit. Since I, too, stood at Moriah and at Sinai, your promise to my forbearers accrues to me as well. I prayed from my heart and You, in turn, on the basis of my personal worth and the largess of my communal inheritance, rose to respond to my prayer. The assumption in this type of prayer is that You are a personal God, one who not only hears and understands the needs of my individual soul, but also stands as the savior of our people. You will respond to my needs and also recognize (and in effect celebrate) my place in the continuity of the Jewish people. You allowed yourself to be entreated (*he'etar*) by my entreating, (e*'ater*). Indeed, You are a personal God who hears. I understand as well that there is judgment involved in Your response. We are responsible for our actions, and thus we judge ourselves and indeed are judged by You.

We then considered the prayers of *tefillah* (*pll*), personal prayers related to judgment, assessed situations, and seemingly negotiated settlements. These prayers are to be answered not only on the basis of historical merit, but also on the basis of a more calculated and self conscious sense of entitlement. These prayers (*tefillot*) also are indicative of the transition from the less conscious to the increasingly self-conscious and more structured prayers of the post-patriarchal era. Hannah's prayers are paradigmatic of this shift as she transitions from a private prayer for her own fertility to her structured prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Her song of thanksgiving (of praise?) is offered in recognition of her own fertile potential. However, it also speaks metaphorically to the birthing of the monarchy in Israel. Hannah presented her case to God, offering her side of the negotiation and then waited for God's judgment. She was willing to "sacrifice" her child to God, but God in return needed to fairly

consider and to weigh her "rights and the obligations" in this matter. She was, after all, given a body that was intended to feed a child and, willing to do her part, she expected, demanded, and insisted upon a fair verdict in the process. She celebrated God's power in earnest, but only after her valid and justified petition had been answered. When we consider prayer (*tefillah*) as a noun and not just a verb, we come to conceptualize the concretization of this particular prayer. The *Tefillah,* (*Shmoneh Esrai*) and the *Sh'ma* represent the major building blocks of post-Temple worship.

With the cries of the verb *tza'ak*, we explored what Soloveitchik believed to be the truest aspect of prayer itself: the guttural cry to God in our hour of deepest, darkest need. When we find ourselves lost beyond repair and faced with the most dire circumstances, we cry to God in a prayer that comes from the depths of our being. In such cases, we do not give great consideration to our relationship to God or to God's acumen or judgment; we simply cry out. This prayer comes not from a rational or well thought out position, but from the visceral instinctive, nearly animalistic center of our being. This response to threat, to pain, or to fear instinctively elicits a cry (*tza'akah*) from the depths to God. These cries (*tza'akot*) exemplify the human search for God out of the place of deepest need.

It is the premise of this work that these three aspects of prayer, as differentiated as they might be, all depend on the precondition that God will hear and answer our prayer. Rabbi Norman Cohen posits that they all exist, each in different nuances under the basic rubric that if man prays, God will hear and God will indeed respond.[164] In Deuteronomy *Rabbah*, the Rabbis articulated this understanding of the personal God, who responds to prayers, accepting that at times one must wait for the answer:

[164] Norman J. Cohen, *Chevruta*, January 17, 2012, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York.

> R. Anan said: The gates of prayer also are never closed, for it is written, *As the Lord our God is whenever we call upon Him;* and calling is nothing else but praying, as Scripture in another context has it, "*And it shall come to pass that, before they call I will answer*" (Isa. 65:24). R. Hiyya the Elder said, It is written "*Wait thou for the Lord; be strong and let thy heart take courage; yea, wait thou for the Lord"* (Psalm 27:14).[165]

As always, Moses stands as our teacher. If the Rabbis teach that God hears and answers prayers, then what of Moses' unanswered prayer to enter the Promised Land? Moses, as always, teaches us the thing that is the most difficult for us to learn. He teaches us, even in his death, something perhaps counterintuitive to that which the Rabbis thought they understood. Moses, by example, teaches us that prayers must be offered to God, as petitions for grace (to seek, to beseech, or to entreat). At the end of his life, Moses, the great leader, comes before God seeking grace. He realizes that his request to enter the Land may only be structured as a request for a gift. Moses teaches that if we dare to come before God, we must recognize our humility and rely on God's compassion as we seek and implore favor. We learn from Moses that we must rely on God's grace if our prayers are ever to be answered. In addition to teaching us the need for grace, Moses' prayer is paradigmatic of the prayer of the righteous, although even the prayer of this most righteous man remained unanswered.

MOSES AND GOD: A SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

It is according to our collective memory as a people and true to the writings of the Rabbis that Moses was the closest to God of all the prophets and of all mankind. Moses

[165] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 2:12.

hears God's voice on Mt. Sinai, and he transmits Torah from God to man. As such, Moses is understood to be different from all other human beings. If God answers the prayers of the righteous, it is nearly inconceivable to us that Moses' prayers might not have been heard. In describing the events at Mount Sinai at the pinnacle of Moses' leadership, the Rabbis in the Midrash *Tanhuma*, described Moses' unique relationship with God:

> This refers to Moses, who ascended to the firmament and whose feet trod on *Araphel* (the lower sky). Moreover, he was like the ministering angels in that he spoke with Him (i.e., the Holy One) face to face and received the Torah from His hand.[166]

Moses' relationship with God, however, was not without its relational stresses. Moses suffered valiantly under the criticisms and chiding of the Jewish people, often straining under the vote of no confidence directed toward him by the people. In the book of Exodus, at the cleft of the rock, Moses asks for reassurance.[167] Like all of us, he demonstrates a need to better understand God. Demanding a hearing from God, Moses, who ultimately received Torah from God's hand and who was the closest of all to truly knowing God, still asks for reassurance. According to Torah and as explicated in the *midrash*, Moses was granted more access to God than any human being before or since. Yet in Deuteronomy when Moses petitioned: "Please, God, let me enter the Promised Land," God refused.

Moses, acknowledged as separate and apart from all others, did not see his prayer completely fulfilled. Although he was allowed to see the land from the heights of Pisga, he was not allowed to enter the Land. The *midrash* reiterates time and time again Moses' sui generis nature. Moses was Moses, there was not another like him:

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[166] *Midrash Tanhuma Ve'etchanan* 2.6.
[167] Exodus 33:13.

> "Because Moses, to whom Jochebed gave birth, was equal to all the people together." And where do we find that he was equal to all the people together? It says…."*And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses*." (Deut 34:10)[168]

Yet, in spite of his singularity, and in spite of (or perhaps because of) his experiences, particularly at the cleft of the rock, Moses must come to terms with the reality of his mortality. The text of the life of this paradigmatic, consummate teacher becomes the ultimate teaching for human-Divine relations. Even as Moses faces the inevitability of his own death, he still teaches us—with the very final vestige of his existence—what it means to be a human being.

Avivah Zornberg writes of Moses: "'You shall not cross over *there:'* geographically, you will not cross over to the land of your desire, but you will leave behind a pedagogical poetry of desire."[169] Moses teaches us that even in his righteousness, his prayers went unanswered. If ever there was a man whose prayers might rightfully have been answered, surely it was Moses. Still, it was not meant to be. God denied his request with this: "No, Moses, your prayers will not be answered."

MOSES ON THE SHORE OF THE PROMISED LAND: PERMISSION TO CROSS

In this, the final aspect of prayer to be considered, we look to Moses, our teacher (*Moshe Rabbeinu),* as he stands at the twilight of his life, poised to enter the Land. He prays,

[168] Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael *Massekta Shirta* Chapter 9.
[169] A.G. Zornberg, "Let Me See That Good Land: The Story of Human Life," in *Answering a Question with a Question: Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Jewish Thought*, ed. Libby Henik and Lewis Aron (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2010), the story of human life 2010, 28.

sometimes translated as pleaded (*ve'etchanan*), but most assuredly he prays. *"I pleaded (ve'etchanan) with Adonai, saying…'Please God, Let me I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan.'*[170] Moses asks God, 'Please let me complete this mission, after all these years and all of this heartbreak, I want to see it through'. We share a clear vision and I want to complete the journey. God does not acquiesce, making His position undeniably understood even in the Torah, "*Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again.*"[171]

Moses pleads with God to allow him to enter the Promised Land. This pleading (*ve'etchanan*), however, is different than Isaac's pleading (*atr*). Its root in Hebrew comes from ח–נ (*ch-n*) which is a two-letter root meaning favor/acceptance with either man or with God, and secondarily associated with favor, grace or elegance as in a person's (generally woman's) appearance. The former usage is most often associated with the phrase "seeking favor in the eyes of…a man, or a king, or most humbly, in the eyes of God."

The concept of seeking favor, the idea that God might consider our prayer out of favor or out of compassion, presupposes a different relationship with the Divine than those outlined in the previous chapters. It speaks to our humility in coming before the Divine—not with a simple plea, not from a negotiated position of deserving, and not from a place of guttural pain, but rather from a place of sheerest and deepest humbleness. The petition for grace reflects an understanding of God's generosity, which is diametrically opposed to the nature of the earlier prayers we have considered.

With the simple words, 'I pleaded (*ve'etchanan*) with God,' we enter an entirely different, radically modulated point of address. We seek God, we implore God, but it is a

[170] Deuteronomy 3:23-25.
[171] Deuteronomy 3:26.

seeking of favor and an imploring for grace. Man is humbled before the magnanimity of the Creator.

HUMILITY IN APPROACHING THE DIVINE

In his work, *Duties of the Heart,* the medieval philosopher Bachya ibn Paquda devotes a full section to humility. Entitled the "Gate of Humility," this chapter addresses the key issues related to the necessity for humility when approaching the Divine. He helps us to appreciate the distinction in the order of magnitude between God and humanity:

> And when the wise and discerning individual thinks of himself, in comparison with all of mankind; and of all mankind, in comparison with the earth's sphere; and of that sphere in comparison with the all-encompassing sphere, and realizes that the whole universe, in comparison with the greatness of the Creator, may He be exalted, is as nothing – he will be humbled in his very soul and lowly before his Creator, as it says; "*What is man that You should be mindful of him, or the son of a man that You should notice him?*" (Psalms 8:5)[172]

Bachya in the conclusion of his discussion quotes Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot*: "Know where you are coming from, where you are going, and before Whom you will give an accounting."[173] If we approach the Divine acknowledging and internalizing the limits of our own capacity and accepting our vulnerability *vis a vis* God and the universe, our prayer brings with it a different foundation of understanding. If we acknowledge the proportional relationship between God and humanity, and our prayers are predicated on this understanding, then our

[172] Bachya Ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, trans. Yaakov Feldman (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 570.
[173] Mishnah *Pirkei Avot 3:1*.

language and our conceptual premise underscore and internalize the reality of the gifts that we have received and might continue to receive over time.

In Deuteronomy *Rabbah*, the Rabbis were explicit regarding the limitations of humanity's claim on God. The Rabbis note that as Moses approaches death he only employs the petition of grace (*tahanunim*) in presenting his request to God. His request is couched in the understanding that all depends on God's graciousness. Even Moses, who has had a special relationship with God and who earlier in his life debated with God and defended the people before God, understood that on his own behalf and in relation to his own needs and wants, his request must be understood only as a matter of grace.

> R. Levi said: The reason why Moses made use only of *tahanunim* is because the proverb says: 'Take care that you are not taken at your own word.' How? *The Holy One, blessed be He, spake to Moses thus: And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious* (Ex. 33:19). God said to Moses: *To him who has any claim upon Me I will show mercy* (ib.), that is, I will deal with him according to My Attribute of Mercy; and as for him who has no claim upon Me, to him "*I will be gracious*", that is, I will grant [his prayer] as an act of grace.? When Moses desired to enter the Land of Israel, God said to him: *Let it suffice Thee (*Deut *3:*26). Whereupon Moses exclaimed before Him: Master of the Universe, hast Thou not said to me, " Any one who has no claim of reward upon Me, to him "*I will be gracious,*" that is, I will grant [his prayer] as an act of grace"? Now I do not claim that there is anything due to me from Thee, but grant Thou me [my prayer] as an act of grace. Whence this? From what we have read in the text under comment, *And I beseech the Lord*.[174]

[174] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 2:1.

Here, the Rabbis acknowledge the need to approach God in humility, necessarily recognizing that God's response is by definition only a matter of grace. When Hannah prayed for a child, the Rabbis understood that she challenged God: "All that You make is perfect and relevant, my breasts, formed by You, were given to me so that I might nurse my child." The implication in her statement is that she somehow is deserving of a child based on the structure and the order of the universe. In Deuteronomy *Rabbah* in the context of attempting to understand the reality of Moses, beseeching (*vetchanan*) God they understand this fertility, this very gift, in Abraham's words as an element of grace:

> R. Levi said: Abraham said to God: 'Master of the Universe, if it is due to me that I should have children, then give them to me, and if not, give them to me for mercy sake…Moses likewise said, "O Lord God, (*yhvh*) O Lord God, thus has begun: if it is due to me that I should enter the Land of Israel, let me enter, and if not, let me enter for mercy sake."[175]

The Rabbis here acknowledge that we might seek from God things that we do not necessarily deserve, but still we ask for them, recognizing God's graciousness and generosity. In the literature, the Rabbis have drawn a linguistic distinction between the different words for God relating to different understood aspects of God's nature. One example of this distinction is that drawn between God's name as the Tetragrammaton and *Elohim*. The Tetragrammaton (*y-h-v-h*) is associated in the *agadah* with God's merciful side while the Rabbis associate *Elohim*, another name for God, with God's attribute of justice. They recognize that in the end, prayers are answered as a gift of grace from God. Ultimately, it is God's unmitigated

[175] Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:1.

mercy in which our fate is held. In this *midrash*, the *y-h-v-h* name for God is used in stressing the compassionate side of God.

JACOB AND ESAU: THE POWER OF GRACIOUSNESS

Moses appeals to God's compassionate side when he beseeches God (*ve'etchanan*). In an attempt to better understand the root of this term, the import of the term grace (*chane*), let us look at the story of Jacob and Esau, where this term also is found. The estranged brothers are meeting on the road 20 years after Esau has threatened to kill his brother over Jacob's treachery in stealing both his birthright and his blessing from their aging father. Jacob is terrified to meet his brother, fearful of retribution, and deeply aware of his culpability. Esau asks Jacob to explain the entourage that accompanies him. Jacob states these are, "*the children with whom God has favored* (asher chanan Elohim) *your servant;*" with whom God has graced (*chanan*) your servant. Later in the same chapter, Jacob asks Esau to accept the presents that he has brought to Esau, for, "*God has favored me* (ki-chanani Elohim) *and I*," continues Jacob, "*have plenty*." [176] There is an understanding of God's abundance of graciousness and of gifts granted by the Divine.

In Jacob's appreciation, perhaps the reality of prayers answered or unanswered is redefined and a different perception of entitlement is considered.[177] The language around the Jacob story helps us to appreciate the notion of God's grace as the source of all. Jacob comprehends that his children, his entourage, and his wealth all have been given to him through the 'grace of God.' Esau asks Jacob why he brought these gifts and Jacob responds,

[176] Genesis 33:5.
[177] Genesis 33:11.

'*To gain my lord's favor* (chane).'[178] We seek favor from those we love, and we offer gifts in an attempt to find favor with others. Ultimately, however, we are invited, through these texts, to internalize the ultimate source of all of our gifts.

SHELTERED IN THE CLEFT: ANOTHER CROSSING

In the great moments in which Moses beseeches God, questions God, and seeks an understanding of and access to God, there is often a notion of crossing[179]. In Deuteronomy, Moses is desperate to complete the journey, to physically cross the Jordan and to bring the children of Israel to liberation in the Promised Land. There is a difference between leaving (Egypt) and fully becoming a free, settled, and liberated people. We read in our *siddur*, 'People hate leaving, but God loves becoming.'[180] The journey took a great portion of Moses' life, and he is understandably upset that he will not be allowed to make the final crossing. Metaphorically, we must consider what it means to cross, to transcend, to transform. Although Moses seeks to complete the transformation and to actualize his vision, God says, "*Never speak to Me of this matter again*."[181] At the story of the cleft of the rock, we also see an example of God's grace but this one involves a different notion of crossing.

Although Moses asks God for something different in each of the moments, they might be construed as interconnected. At the rock, Moses struggles on two fronts: He struggles as

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[178] Genesis 33:8.
[179] See Zornberg *Let Me See that Good Land, subchapter Crossing.*
[180] "Once or Twice in a lifetime, a man or woman may choose a radical leaving, having heard lech l'cha - Go forth God disturbs us toward our destiny by hard events and by freedom's now urgent voice which explode and confirm who we are. We don't like leaving, but God loves becoming." Elyse D. Frishman, ed., *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: CCAR Press, 2009). 231.
[181] Deuteronomy 3:26.

the leader of this difficult and evolving people, and he struggles privately with his own fears and personal search as an individual. For all who endeavor to be leaders, bringing the word of God to the people, there is, no doubt, a similar struggle. Moses knew God in the most intimate way, and still he asked for more—for a clearer, more defined understanding of the Divine. God spoke to Moses face to face (*panim al panim*), one to another.[182] In addition, Moses had the cloud, by day and the fire by night, as objective evidence of God's presence. Even with this firsthand knowledge, Moses struggled.

> *See, You say to me, "Lead this people forward," but You have not made known* (ho'datani) *to me whom You will send with me…*[183]

How do we, in the generations so long removed from Sinai, even imagine that we can with any confidence bring forth the teachings of God and Torah? Even Moses, who by many accounts knew God, struggled with the reality of leadership and with the reality of knowing God. Between receiving the first and the second set of tablets, he pleads with God:

> "*Now if I have truly gained favor (*chane*), pray (*na*) let me know (*hodiani*) Your ways, that I may know You (*viaydaakah*) and continue in Your favor (*chane biaynekha*). Consider, too, that this people is Your people."*[184]

Moses pleads with God for confirmation, support, and affirmation. If, says Moses, I have truly found favor in Your eyes, if You really do accept and honor me, then please let me know You. In some ways these words epitomize the struggle of every believing soul: Remind me, God, that You are present in my life, too. Remind me that You are with me on my journey, on the path that I am taking, and in the choices that I am making. Unlike Moses,

[182] Exodus 33:11.
[183] Exodus 33:13.
[184] Exodus 33.13.

I have not necessarily spoken to You face to face, and there is no pillar of cloud or fire marking our conversation or supporting our decisions to stay where we are or to move forward. How, then, might I come to know You or to understand Your ways?

One way that the Rabbis understood the story of the cleft of the rock was as an issue of humanity's desire to see God's ways. We cry out; help us, God, to understand Your ways, to understand the reality of Your grace and Your will in the world. In Song of Songs Rabbah, we see the Rabbis struggling precisely with this unknowable reality:

> Thus, says Moses to the Holy One praised be He: "*Pray let me know Your ways* (Ex 33:12) and He made them known to him, as it says, "*He made known his ways to Moses*" (Psalm 103:7) [Moses said to him], "*Oh let me behold Your Presence.*" (Ex 33:18). Show me the method (*middah*) by which You direct the world." He said to him, "You are not able to comprehend my methods (*middot*)."[185]

The Rabbis stress that Moses is not capable of understanding God's ways, God's *middot*, and indeed, Moses' struggle to know God, is the eternal struggle of humanity to know God: You might know God, but you may never fully understand God's ways. You, who I struggle to really understand. You, the One who at times I have trouble articulating or internalizing what it might really mean to 'know.' Please give me a sign, remind me of Your reality. Help me please to understand Who You are and the infinite nature of Your power. I who assuredly struggle daily with broken dreams or illness or loss, witness of the worst atrocities known to man, witness to injustice or great tragedy or sadness, remind me of Your Presence, remind me of Your reality. If I have truly gained favor in Your eyes, then please, let me

[185] Song of Songs Rabbah 25:6.

know You. Moses' request is explicit: *"Oh, let me behold Your presence!"* and is, in fact, a request for grace.[186] God answers Moses:

> *I will make all My goodness pass (*a'avir*) before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I granted (*vichanoti et asher achone*) and the compassion that I show. But, He said, "you cannot see my face, for man may not see Me and live."*[187]

And God directs Moses to be shielded in the cleft of the rock. Only then does God allow God's goodness to pass before Moses and the grace that God granted to be shown.

In the Babylonian Talmud the Rabbis interpret this promise as a watershed. Until that time, the Rabbis believed that God might or might not answer the prayers of the Israelites. Fulfillment of this promise indicates that from this moment forward, the Israelite's prayers will be answered. Never again will the Israelites as a people, although not necessarily as individuals, return with prayers unfulfilled. Never again will the people of Israel return empty handed.[188]

How do we reconcile this promise that the prayers of the Israelites will never go unanswered with God's rejection of Moses' pleas to enter the Land? What do we need to learn from the reality that although Moses prayed to God to allow him to see the Promised Land, God did not fulfill Moses' prayer? For the rest of us, clearly in a different class than Moses, what does Moses' story teach us about the efficacy of prayer? Do we accept that prayers go unanswered or perhaps that the answers we receive do not necessarily coalesce with the answers for which we had hoped? Is it a failure of response or perhaps, more likely, a failure on our part to comprehend the answer we receive? How do we learn to understand

[186] Exodus 33:18.
[187] Exodus 33:19-20.
[188] Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 17b.

and "accept" these answers? How can we learn to find power and compassion and mercy in these answers? How do we reconcile the call to action in our lives with the ultimate acceptance of God's role in shaping our lives? What, indeed, do we learn from Moses?

THE FIRST SIGHTING: THE BURNING BUSH

Moses' desire to know God does not begin at the Cleft of the Rock When Moses stood at the Burning Bush, —before he was Moses with a capital M—he, was frightened by the sight of the bush that failed to be consumed. He, was frightened to see God, perhaps to know God. Like Abraham, when called twice directly by God he answered "*I am here,* Hineini," he did not hesitate he did not withdraw. Although The Jewish Publication Society translates his response as "fear," there is a longstanding ambiguity around the word for fear (*yira).* If we accept this term as "'awe"' rather than simple fear, then Moses' response, his discomfort, his unfathomable realization that he must remove his shoes, eliminating any distance between himself and the hallowed ground, shows that he is most keenly made aware of his unmitigated vulnerability:

> Moses said, "*I must* turn *aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And he answered. Here I am"* (Hineini), *And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am," He said, "the God of your father, and the God of*

> *Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face for he was afraid* (yirei) *to look at God*.[189]

We, too, are continuously awed—blown away, stopped in our tracks— by God's majesty and by the breathtaking reality of the presence of the Divine. In the exchange that follows, God "calls" Moses to go to Pharaoh and to negotiate the Israelites freedom. Moses questions God, "Who am I to take on this task?" God reassures Moses that He will be with him. Moses pursues the questioning, begging God for a sense of clarity, a way to bring God and God's authority to the people, echoing Moses' request at the beginning of his relationship with God, when Moses asked God for understanding: "How can I describe you?" The Rabbis in *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* capture the essence of this prayer in a breathtaking interchange:

> Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Sovereign of all words! Make known to me Thy great and holy Name, that I may call on Thee by Thy Name, and Thou wilt answer me," as it is said, "*And God said unto Moses, I am that I am* (*Ehyeh-Asher- Ehyeh*) (Ex 3:14)." [190]

God responds to Moses as an act of grace (*chane*). He understands Moses' request and he replies, answering his petitionary prayer. Gersonides wrote, "Moses was not asking for an identifier, but for a name that describes the essential quality of the thing that it names."[191] Moses asks for an indication that God will be with him, as was promised in the Torah, and God complies. The nature of the Name offered is unknowable, and perhaps this explains the volumes that have been written on the ineffable Name of God. The act of naming helps humans to conceptualize and to internalize the reality of the object in question.

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[189] Exodus 3:6.
[190] *Pirkei de' Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 40.
[191] Gersonides Commentary on Exodus 3:14.

Yet, the essence of God is in God's infiniteness and, in some respects, in God's unknowable nature. Spinoza wrote that the knowing of God is a post-rational experiential endeavor. Within God's answer — "I will be what I will be," or perhaps "I am what I am"—lies the infinite nature of God, the presence of the future, the ultimate present, and the eternal. God will always be there for us, which is a complicated gift to understand and to appreciate.

The *midrash* continues with a beautiful response by the angels, who the Rabbis purport to have observed the revelation of God to Moses:

> The angels saw that the Holy One, blessed be He, had transmitted the secret of the Ineffable name to Moses, and they rejoined: "Blessed are thou, O Lord, who graciously bestoweth knowledge."

The angels, upon witnessing the revelation of God's sacred ineffable Name, are moved to pray for understanding, for discernment, and that they too, like Moses, perhaps will have access to knowing God, through knowing God's name. God has disclosed to Moses the secret of the ineffable Name, and thus we pray daily to God in the *Amidah*:

> You grace (*chonane*) humans with knowledge
> And teach mortals understanding
> Graciously share with us Your insight, wisdom and knowledge
> Blessed are You, *Adonai* who graces (*chonane*) us with knowledge

This prayer, the fourth in the daily *tefillah*, follows the blessing of the holy name (*Kiddushat Ha Shem*). It is the first prayer in the second rubric—the petitionary prayers. Indeed, it is our first structured petitionary prayer, our first request that God will grant us wisdom, understanding and knowledge. Like the angels, we human beings also seek to understand the Divine and to know God in all that this implies. We pray each day that we might know

God, and that we might understand God. Perhaps the first answer to this fundamentally human prayer is our acceptance that the gift of knowledge is, first and foremost, a matter of grace.

MOSES CONTINUES HIS SEEKING AT THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK

Within the shelter of the cleft of the rock, Moses is protected by God, and God states that He will allow His goodness to cross/pass (*avr*) over Moses. This is the same verb Moses uses when he pleads to be allowed to cross (*avr*) into the Promised Land. In both cases, Moses seeks a transformation. Although one is perhaps more physical (in the crossing of the Jordon), both are significant in terms of Moses redefining and re-knowing himself.

At the cleft of the rock, God meets Moses and allows God's grace to shower over him. They even speak (metaphorically) face-to-face. But what has changed then, by the time Moses gets to the shore of the Jordan? Note how the Rabbis in *Midrash Tanhuma* recognize the link between the grace evident at the cleft of the rock and Moses' petition for grace at the shores of the Jordan:

> Sovereign of the World, please show me by what principle You run the world. *The Holy One said to him: I will show you.* (Ex 33:19) *And He said, I will make my goodness pass* [before you]. The Holy One said to him: I have no obligation to any creature, but I am giving you [this] as a favor (*chane*). *Thus it is stated I will be gracious (chane) to whom I will be gracious.* Moses said to him: If so, do me a

kindness and grant it to me as a favor (chane). Ergo *I pleaded with the Lord*. (Deut. 3:23)[192]

Aware of the largess of God's graciousness, Moses recognizes that the time has passed for him to present his case—advocating for some earned right—before God. He recognizes, too, that an affirmative response to his petitionary prayer will come only from the grace of God:

> *I pleaded with the Lord at the time, saying ….Let me, I pray cross over (e'berah) and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan…but the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!"*[193]

When Moses' plea to God to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land is forcefully denied, it is not surprising that Moses responds with great personal shock. Suddenly, the lines of communication are severed and Moses, who is accustomed to speaking to God face-to-face, is silenced.

FRUSTRATION: GOD REJECTS MOSES' PLEA

Devastated by God's decree, Moses rails against God and continues to plead, even as he is forced to come to terms with his own vulnerability and mortality. Moses believes that his request is justified and, indeed, the Rabbis portray him as still pushing to enter the Land. He has spent 40 years supporting, defending, encouraging, and berating the people. He has

[192] *Midrash Tanhuma parashat Va'etchanan* 2:3
[193] Deuteronomy 3:23ff.

shepherded his flock, traversing the desert and the wilderness. When the Israelites finally find themselves on the edge of the Promised Land looking out, Moses, too, wants to enter with his people. God, however, has refused his request. Moses is aware that he, like every human being, has sinned. He is flawed; he is not perfect. And yet, like anyone who has ever led a project, launched an enterprise, raised a child, or nourished an idea, Moses wants to see his endeavor through to a successful end, and partake in the gift of touching the Land. For Moses—and for many of us—this simple and understandable desire to complete a task as a means to finding wholeness or peace is not fulfilled. God was quite clear in His decision, but still Moses argues. According to a *midrash* in the *Sifre* Deuteronomy and in *Tanhuma*, Moses pleads in desperation: If I cannot spend a year or two there, in the Promised Land, if I cannot go there alive, perhaps in my death I might be brought there?[194]

Despite Moses' pleading, God refuses his request to cross over, even posthumously. The non-negotiable nature of God's response to Moses' pleas is unambiguous. Moses' final prayer is not answered. What does this scenario tell us about the limitation of our own prayers? What does it teach us about embracing our own mortality? Like Moses, we are human, we are flawed, and we will die. We are, of course, responsible for what we do with the time that we have been gifted, but these texts help us to focus on the inevitability that our time is finite.

THE NEXT GENERATION

Transition is challenging and succession planning is a serious and delicate matter. Far too often, founding leaders fail to recognize when it is time to transfer authority and

[194] Sifre on Deuteronomy *Piska* 357 (See also *Midrash Tanhuma parashat Va'etchanan* 2:6).

when it is time to raise up new leaders for the next generation. The Torah communicates the need for the passing of the torch and indeed these texts underscores the value of clean and healthy leadership transitions. The Rabbis in Deuteronomy *Rabbah* recognize as well the significant pain that comes to the emeritus when new leadership has been invested:

> R. Abin said: This can be compared to a king who had a favorite, who had the power to appoint generals, governors, and commanders-in-chief. Later, the people saw him entreating the gate-keeper to let him enter the palace, and he would not permit him. Everyone was amazed at this and said, 'Yesterday he was appointing general, governors, and commanders-in-chief and now he in vain begs the gate-keeper to let him enter the palace.' The answer given to them was: [His] hour is past.' So too with Moses.[195]

It was time for a change in leadership. Only two individuals that were present in Egypt were said to enter the Promised Land. It was no longer Moses' role to lead the people. His time had passed.

We often see such transition issues painfully replicated between parents and children, between founders and incoming managers, and between existing synagogue leaders and emerging young professionals. Children were born to grow away from us. How do we let them fulfill their purpose if we stand in their way? The transition can be so painful that senior Rabbis or managers, so tied to their own egos and sense of purpose, may fail to groom the next generation of leaders just as parents may stunt the growth and independence of the children they so love. Failure to plan for succession, particularly in the Jewish communal world, is potentially detrimental to the development of both our people and our institutions, with damage accruing in two directions: At the institutional level where succession planning

[195] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 2:3.

has not been effective, organizations may be left leaderless. On a personal level, individuals' sense of worth can be compromised. Far too frequently, when a person, who may in fact, be a great leader is too tied to his or her sense of purpose, collateral damaged may result. Often, he or she may fail to recognize the very human needs of loved ones or the plurality of her own purpose in life. Such individuals may ignore the needs of the next generation to establish its own authority and vision, and to nurture its own ability to see across the river and begin to hold a vision for the Promised Land. This failure of recognition also leaves the aging leader isolated and disconnected from the potential that exists in other aspects of his or her life.

MOSES RECOGNIZES THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE

Moses ultimately recognizes that the needs of the people of Israel exceed his own needs for closure and accomplishment, as well as his own personal desires. The Rabbis in *Midrash Tanhuma* give shape to God's interaction with Moses on this matter. They expand on Moses' (and our) understanding that our own needs and prayers must be considered in the context of the larger community and ultimately within the grandeur of creation:

> The *Holy* One said to Moses: Moses, I have two oaths, one that you should die and one to destroy Israel. To repeal them is impossible; so if you want to life, Israel will be destroyed. He said, Sovereign of the World, are You coming to me with a plot. …Let Moses and a thousand like him be destroyed, but not let one person in Israel be destroyed. [196]

The enormity of the mission placed before Moses by God is nearly unfathomable. God says, "It is Your life in exchange for the life of the People Israel." Moses acquiesces and submits

[196] *Midrash Tanhuma, parashat Va'etchanan* 2:6.

to God's will in favor of the future of the Jewish people. The position taken by the Rabbis underscores the reality that his life's work—the progression of the Jewish people is of utmost importance. It helps Moses to accept that his personal need for accomplishment must be subordinated to the needs of the people as a whole. When the reality is made clear to Moses in the voices of the Rabbis, Moses' commitment to the Jewish people is clarified. As desperate as Moses is to reach the Promised Land, he realizes that his role as leader will no longer benefit the people. His life's mission has been to move the cause of the people forward. When faced with the reality that his leadership—and possibly even his presence—might be detrimental to his people's future, he accepts that he must step aside. His vision must remain a vision, a potential for he will never enter the Land.

THE REALITY OF HUMAN IMPERFECTION

In the Torah an explanation is given for why Moses will not be admitted to the Promised Land. It is written that Moses sinned at *Kadesh,* and God makes it clear that neither Moses nor Aaron will lead the congregation into the Promised Land. There are many notions surrounding the nature of the sin. God has instructed Moses to raise his staff, but Moses has struck the rock. Was it the physical hitting of the rock that led to Moses' downfall? Was it the failure to control his emotions and the unbridled expression of anger that led to the hitting of the rock that angered God? Or, perhaps Moses was relieved of his command because of his failure of faith. It says in the text, *Moses and Aaron lost faith, and failed to sanctify God in the face of the children of Israel.*[197]

[197] Numbers 20:12.

As a Jewish leader, acknowledging one's struggles with knowing or understanding the ways of God is valid and understandable, and even powerful. A rabbinate honest about vulnerability and doubt is most likely a strong and healthy rabbinate. Was it the loss of faith, or the failure to sanctify that was more problematic? The Rabbis in Numbers *Rabbah* were concerned with the public nature of Moses' failure of faith.[198]

Perhaps this teaches us a lesson about the power of ritual and prayer. Not necessarily the internal spiritual veracity (*kavanah*) of the prayer but the fixed and ritualistic (*kevah*) nature of the discipline. There are by definition times in the life of every human being, when accessing God or reaching God in our prayers does not seem feasible. We all experience the 'dark night of the soul,' times when we feel we cannot reach God, regardless of our intentions or efforts. Times when we feel that God is for some reason inaccessible, or unfathomably distant. Perhaps the Rabbis here were counseling the 'discipline' of sanctifying God's name, through prayer, through ritual, through study or holy actions. We know that at times it will seem impossible to find God, but if we abandon the rituals that allow us to bring God into our lives, if we fail to sanctify God's name out of discipline and habit, then in our most arid times, the potential to return to God's presence, is in effect limited.

MOSES RECOGNIZES THE REALITY OF HIS DEATH

Moses as portrayed in both the Bible and the *midrash*, struggles valiantly against his own mortality. The Rabbis in the *midrash* soften God's harsh response, "*Never speak to Me*

[198] Numbers *Rabbah* 19:10.

of this matter again,"[199] attributing a compassionate voice to God, who indeed supports Moses in his dying. After defending himself against the Angel of Death, Moses pleads with God in the *midrash*:

> Having found an opportunity to speak, Moses said to the Holy One:
>
> > Master of the Universe,
> >
> > Remember that day when You said to me:
> >
> > *Go forth and I'll send you unto Pharaoh…(*Ex. 3:10)
> >
> > And remember the day when I ascended Mount Sinai and remained in Your Presence forty days and nights. I didn't eat any food or drink or water until I received the Torah from You and gave it to the people Israel. I beg of You, do not deliver me into the hand of the Angel of Death. Rather, here I am in Your sight with Your servant.
>
> The Holy One replied:
>
> > Do not be afraid.
> >
> > I myself will take care of you and bury you.[200]

Even in this kindest of tones, it appears to Moses that his petition for God's grace is denied as he learns that although he will be allowed to see the Land, he will not be allowed to enter it before he dies. Perhaps Moses failed to recognize that even though his prayers (as he spoke them) had not been answered that indeed God had granted him grace. The Rabbis teach us that even Moses, who has been so close to God and has known God as no other man

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[199] Deuteronomy 3:26.
[200] *Midrash Petirat Moshe, Otzar Midrashim*, (Translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey Sirkman, "*Midrash Petirat Moshe*: A Structural and Thematic Analysis" (Rabbinic diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1987), 61.

has known God, must die. This is the reality of life and so it must be. Moses must die, but in his death perhaps he is transformed,

> So even though one ascends to the heavens and makes himself wings
> like a bird, when his time to die arrives, his wings are broken and he
> falls before the angel of death.[201]

This imagery of the wings breaking as we humans fall back to our mortal end is beautiful. We are like God, but the finite nature of our lives sets us apart from God. It is the essence of our humanity that necessitates that our lives must end and that we must die. As beautiful and loving and perfect as the 71-year marriage has been, it will end, in the death of one of the partners. So, too, will death take the lover in the prime of life and the mother of teenage girls. No one escapes this reality, not even Moses. However, how we as individuals address death, where we put it in our worldview of the reality of our lives and of our deaths, necessarily changes the impact of our fate. Fear of death is human, but those who die without fear, in effect, preserve the end of their lives. Those who accept death as a part of life and neither fear it nor fight it, experience a sense of balance, of blessing, and of wholeness (*sheleimut)* in the end of their lives. Carol Ochs taught us about "…the patient who always believed in a miracle, who one day greeted us with the words, 'I think this is the miracle – I am ready now and not afraid anymore.'"[202] The patient's crossing over to recognize the "miracle" in some ways parallels Moses' transformation before his own death.

The Rabbis in *Midrash Tanhuma* help us to remember our mortality: "From this it follows that for the righteous and for all mortals death has been ordained from time

[201] *Midrash Tanhuma, parashat Va'etchanan* 2:6.
[202] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1969), quoted in Carol Ochs, *Women and Spiritiuality* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,1983), 140.

immemorial."[203] There is no ambiguity; the acceptance of our own mortality is clearly an important issue in our lives. It is addressed in the Torah and supported through the rabbinic writings. How to understand and how to accept the finite nature of our lives remains for us an inestimable challenge. But Moses, our teacher, teaches us, even through his death, the reality of the limits on all of our lives.

As the end of his life approaches, Moses is afraid. The reality of his mortality is clear and he faces his death with great trepidation. In the *midrash*, in response to Moses' fears, God says: Do not be afraid. I myself will take care of you and bury you.

> Immediately Moses fell upon his face and began to pray (*btefilah*), crying out in supplication (*tachanun*):
>
> > Master of the Universe,
> >
> > With the quality of mercy You created Your world,
> >
> > And through the quality of mercy You direct Your world.
> >
> > Treat me with Divine Mercy,
>
> Thereupon a heavenly voice went forth and said,
>
> > Moses, Moses! Do not fear, your righteousness precedes you,
> >
> > Thus God's glory shall gather you in.
>
> At that moment, the Divine Presence descended with the three angels; Gabriel, Michael and Sangazel. Michael prepared Moses' bed, Gabriel spread a fine linen sheet underneath his head and Sangazel did the same under his feet.
>
> Then the Holy One was revealed to Moses and said:
>
> > Shut your eyes, one after the other; and he did
>
> Then He said:

[203] *Midrash Tanhuma, parashat Va'etchanan* 2:6.

Place your hands one upon the other;

and he did.

And put your feet one next to the other.

Then in an instant, the Holy One kissed Moses on his mouth, taking away his soul with the kiss.

And it is said *Thus Moses, the servant of the Lord died there, in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord*. (Deut. 34:5)

Whereupon the angels cried for him and eulogized him, saying;

Where is wisdom to be found, and what is the place of understanding?[204]

Moses died, his prayer seemingly unanswered. And yet, God had not abandoned him. Just prior to Moses' death, God spoke directly to him saying, "Do not be afraid, I will bury you." And then, in an ultimate act of graciousness, God took Moses' soul with a Divine kiss. The way Moses reconciles this act with the seemingly unanswered prayer helps each of us to wrestle with our own seemingly unanswered prayers. Perhaps in accepting God's answer—recognizing that it was his time and that he was indeed ready—Moses was in essence receiving the true answer to his prayer.

We know as human beings that often our prayers are not met with the response that we seek. Yet we learn from Moses that not receiving what we had wished for does not necessarily mean that God has not heard or even answered our prayers. When Moses abandons his negotiations with God, petitioning God only for God's grace, perhaps Moses teaches us that all comes to us only by the grace of God.

[204] *Petirat Moshe, Otsar Midrashim 62.*

A Final Crossing

God catches Moses' attention with the Burning of the Bush. Preceding the cleft of the rock, Moses speaks with God face-to-face. Then, because "*No one can see God's face and live,"* God shelters Moses in the cleft of the rock.[205] Yet we know that Moses already had been exposed to the essence and the face of the Divine. Perhaps it was this undeniable truth in concert with his ultimate humanity that confirmed for Moses the certainty that he, like each of us, must die. No one may see God's face and live, yet God shows God's self to us in every aspect of our lives.

When Moses recognizes the needs of the people and the limits of his own mortality, perhaps he experiences a different kind of crossing. This is a more internal transformation than the physical crossing of the Jordan. Perhaps it is with this newfound understanding that it is God in God's grace Who indeed hears and answers our prayers that Moses returns to plead (*ve'etchanan*) with God.

Moses taught us multiple ways to approach the Divine: seeking all that we might ever want, fighting with all of our vigor, and demanding that God hear and answer our prayers. Yet this active seeking exists in constant tension with our accepting the reality of our own vulnerability and the stewardship of our lives through God. By balancing this tension and living simultaneously within the context of both of these worlds, Moses has taught us to pray, taught us to live, and, ultimately how we might seek grace from God at the end of our lives.

[205] Exodus 33:20.

CONCLUSION

A STEP ALONG THE WAY

God is distant and yet near. How? R. Judah b. Simon said: From here [the earth] unto heaven is a journey of five hundred years; hence He is distant. When do we know that He is also near? A man stands at prayer and meditates in his heart and God is near unto his prayer, as it is said, *O Thou that hearest prayer unto Thee doeth all flesh come* (Ps. 75:3)

Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:1

והקב"ה רחוק וקרוב כיצד א"ר יהודה בר סימון מכאן ועד לרקיע מהלך ת"ק שנה הרי רחוק, וקרוב מנין שאדם עומד ומתפלל ומהרהר בתוך לבו וקרוב הקב"ה לשמוע את תפלתו שנא' (תהלים סה) שומע תפלה עדיך כל בשר יבואו

Prayer versus Study

I have spent the better part of the last year considering four major paradigms of prayer that are found in the Bible. I have refined my understanding of these texts through consideration of the Rabbinic commentaries found in the *Midrash* and the Talmud as well as certain more modern *Midrashic* commentaries. This Thesis is in some ways the culmination of that work. However, perhaps the most striking conclusion to be drawn is that this work is only one step in a life long process. Through this study of prayer it has become increasingly clear to me that we must recognize that a relationship with the Divine must change over a human lifetime. It has become clear that attempting to study it or to understand it must also span a lifetime. In the life of a person or in reality over the life of our people, our engagement with the Divine is by definition subject to continuous change. Prayer is clearly an evolving process.

There is a longstanding argument between the Rabbis as to the relative value of prayer versus study. How does one reach the Divine, how does one learn to understand God's will and the nature and the reality of the Divine? I was taught in my childhood that when a person prays, he speaks to God, but when a man studies, God speaks to him.[206] For many years my relationship to the Divine virtually ignored prayer and focused almost exclusively on study. Today, there is a balance for me between the two, an attempt to open the true dialogue with God, through the blessings of both study and prayer. Each of these modes serves as an access point, bandwidth for my communication with God; essence and

[206] Abraham Joshua Heschel reiterates this notion with reference to an unnamed medieval commentator in his essay collection,*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays By Abraham Joshua Heschel*, edited by Susannah Heschel, Macmillan May 1997, 37.

understanding flowing in both directions across this sacred superhighway. The Rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud wrote of the necessity for both study and prayer:

Three were concerned with matters of conduct? What must a man do that he may become wise? He replied: Let him engage much in study and a little in business. Did not many, they said, do so and it was of no avail to them? Rather, let them pray for mercy from Him to whom is the wisdom, for it is said, *For the Lord giveth wisdom, out of His mouth cometh knowledge and discernment* (Prov. 11:6)… What then does he teach us? That one without the other does not suffice. [207]

This work, studying these texts and exploring these issues has in effect brought me to a new understanding. I have spent a tremendous amount of time trying to understand how we might live in God's presence and bring God into our lives. I have struggled for many years to live a more grateful and appreciative life, for praise of God to come more naturally. This work, this study, this exploration of the texts, has helped me to transform my understanding.

Accepting the Answering of our Prayers as a Gift

The conclusions portrayed herein emerged through this process of study. The studying in and of itself was in effect revelatory, bringing a new understanding of the dynamics of prayer. Through the process of wrestling with the texts, it became clear that of the three traditional categorizations of prayer: petition (*bakhashot*), praise (*shevach*) and thanksgiving (*hoda'ot*), this work was focused almost exclusively on prayers of a petitionary nature. This bias towards the study of prayers of petition seemed to reflect an inherent

[207] Babylonian Talmud *Niddah* 70b.

personal struggle with matters of knowing and understanding the Divine. Initially the literary distinction that was drawn between the narrative texts of the Bible and the Psalms was understood to have produced this imbalance. From an objective and analytical standpoint the literary distinction does contribute to the imbalance, but what is far more striking perhaps is the essential spiritual component which exaggerated this bias.

What emerged from the work was the necessary distinction that must be drawn between the prayers of the first three chapters, and the prayers of the fourth.

The first three chapters of the work explored prayers that presume that God will respond and indeed is compelled to respond to our prayers on the basis of the merit or actions or promises of the petitioner. In the fourth chapter we dealt with the matter of God's grace.

I have come to accept that if grace is indeed the underlying basis of our existence, then awe, and praise and thanksgiving are literally essential to our service of the Divine. How can we pray with true integrity if we fail to stand in awe, offering praise and thanksgiving for that which we have received? If we do not appreciate the source of our gifts, then on what basis and to whom are we indeed praying?

The Work of the Chapters

In the first chapter, we explored the prayers of petition, (*atr*) when Isaac prays on behalf of his wife. We studied human love and companionship, which enhances the power of our prayers. The Rabbis believed that our prayers can transform the nature of God's relationship with humanity. Like the pitchfork, our prayers could alter our world and lay the foundation for growth and for hope. The Rabbis clearly favor the power of those who pray

in concert with others, championing communal prayer and the confluence of interests when approaching the Divine.

In the second chapter, we learned of Hannah's yearnings and fearless approach toward God, like Job, standing up for that which she believed to be her due. She engaged with God, (*pll*) aggressively pursuing the relationship. Anger at God, sometimes chided by the Rabbis, might also be read as evidence of a vibrant and flexible relationship. We noted here the transformation and the emergence of more sophisticated (yet pre Rabbinic) prayer structures as the Israelites left the desert and established a more structured post desert society. We saw Hannah as a bridge between the patriarchal simplicity and the sophistication of this newly emerging society.

In the third chapter, we looked at the guttural, (*tza'ak*) non rational petitions of the heart, prayers from the depths understood by Soloveitchik to represent the truest and most distilled form of prayer. We traced the pain of these guttural cries, considering God's response, God's unique sense of time and ultimately God's command to act! This helped us to consider the role of mankind in co-navigating our journeys. How do we integrate and balance our responsibility to act with the over arching notion of God's ultimate power and grace?

Through chapter four, we explored Moses' prayer to God, his prayer of beseeching (*ve'etchanan*). Moses prays, internalizing and seeking the potential for grace. Moses models for us the realization that when we come before the Divine, we bring our selves seeking grace, seeking a gift from God. We are forced by the study of the prayers of the fourth chapter to internalize the true relationship between man and God. To accept that although we are compelled to act under the rubrics of the third chapter, "Why do you cry out to Me?" to

take responsibility for our destiny and the course of our lives, that our fate is ultimately tied to God's propensity for grace. Moses, our Teacher is denied his final petition. Yet, the Rabbis teach us that he was not abandoned but enveloped in God's arms, buried personally by God. Each morning my husband and I recite *Modeh Ani*, the morning prayer, thanking God for returning our breath to us after the metaphoric death of sleep. The Rabbis paint for us the most beautiful metaphor. At the time of Moses' death, not only does Moses again see God's face but his lips are kissed as his final breath "*Elohai Nishama*, the breath that You have given me is pure" is taken away directly by God. Because ultimately you cannot see my face and live."[208] Ultimately we are all human, our lives finite. If we can pray not to fear death but to embrace it, to see it as a kiss from the Divine then indeed are prayers may transform our lives.

We learn from Moses, that once we have internalized the true role of God's gifts in our lives, the inherent necessity to offer thanks and praise to God is irrefutable, the power of the grace (*chane*) is undeniable. What I understood for many years to be a simple failure of gratefulness seems more likely to have been an inherent misconception of God's role in the universe. Having recognized this reality, my conception of prayer has been irrevocably altered. If one fully internalizes God's role in granting us every atom, every quark of our existence, our relationship to praise and thanksgiving as a part of our prayer reality must necessarily change. I know that I will never again be able to stand before the Divine without recognizing the essential connection.

[208] Exodus 33:20.

How to Proceed: Why Do You Cry out to Me?…. Just Move

We pray daily for understanding (*bina*), this work, this study was in effect an answer to this prayer. Not a full answer, as the work is not stagnant, but a forward movement on the continuum of understanding, an enhancement of our relationship to the Divine. What has resulted from this work is a visceral need to better understand, to further explore the nature of prayers of Thanksgiving and of Praise. The methodology would be the same. First, explore the biblical texts and then pursue the Rabbinic commentaries that elucidate and expand upon these paradigmatic moments.

We would return perhaps to Exodus and to The Song of the Sea.[209] (*Shirat Ha-Yam*). Having triumphed against the Egyptians at the Crossing of the Sea, the Israelites raised their voices in the deepest truest and most profound celebration of faith. As the preceding chapter concludes:

Thus the Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shores of the sea. And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and His servant Moses.[210]

Immediately following this proclamation, the following chapter opens with the Song of the Sea; quintessentially triumphant words of praise and thanksgiving. Soloveitchik describes this type of prayer again using the Song of the Sea as proof text, as the outpouring of a grateful soul seething with longing and yearning for the beloved who is lovely and full

[209] Exodus 15:1ff.
[210] Exodus 14:30-31.

of grace. *This is my God and I will adore Him.* (Ex. 15:2).[211] Our approach would be consistent: we would analyze this text and then we would turn to the Rabbis and their understandings. In the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, the Rabbis ask of the uniqueness of this song; "Is there only one song? (*shira*) Are there not ten songs?"[212] and then begin their study of the ten songs. They teach in the eighth song, of the "A Psalm, a Song at the Dedication of the House of David." Although Solomon built it, they argue that "since David was with his whole soul devoted to it, wishing to build it, it is named after him." They note that when a person is completely devoted to something that it is in effect named for them. They teach of us Moses' devotion to Torah, to the People of Israel and to Justice, each named for Moses. They study naming and the devotion of the soul in this midrashic study of the songs of praise and thanksgiving.

A Call To Psalms

Aware of a need to explore the other two legs of the trilateral notion of prayer, (petition, thanksgiving and praise) our future exploration would unfold. The narratives supported by the texts of the *midrash* and the Talmud would help us to better understand the deep and transformative nature of these prayers. However, through the work on this Thesis, it became increasingly clear that an extensive study of the Psalms and their commentaries as well as the narratives in the Bible, would be crucial to this work. Rashi's introduction to the Psalms opens with his own medieval Rabbinic enumeration,

[211] Soloveitchik *Worship of the Heart*, 65.
[212] Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Massekta d'Shirata*, 1:15.

This book is composed of ten poetic genres [each identifiable by a characteristic introductory expression]: leading, instrumental music, psalm, song, *hallel* [i.e. 'praise'], prayer, *berakhah* ['blessng'], thanksgiving, laudations, and Hallelujah. [213]

These ten poetic genres might form the basis of future study. The work would commence with a careful reading of the Psalms themselves followed by an in-depth study of the *Midrash* on Psalms, and related concordance work. The Rabbis in the *midrashim* concern themselves with the words of each of the psalms and the contextual and thematic issues surrounding each work. With regard to psalm 106, the Midrash on Psalms shares with us the potential limitations on us as human beings lest we consider our prayers of praise as somehow sufficient:

Rabbi taught: Even if the mouths of the righteous men were changed into springs ceaselessly pouring out praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, do you suppose that then they could pour forth His glory, the whole of it? Never! [214]

The Rabbis grapple with the finite nature of human knowledge, human understanding and the egregious presumption that we might in some way be in a position to sufficiently praise God. In considering the awesome nature of God, they offer the following commentary using the text from the Song of the Sea as their proof text,

Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty? . . . *Fearful in praises* (Ex. 15:11). What is meant by *Fearful in praises*? R. Yudan said: It means, Thy fearfulness transcends all praise that can be uttered of Thee… His fearfulness (*nora*) transcends all the praise you can utter of Him.[215]

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[213] *Rashi's Introduction to the Psalter in English with Notes* in Rashi's Commentary on Psalms, Translated by Meyer A. Gruber (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2005),165.
[214] Midrash on Psalms 104:2.
[215] Midrash on Psalms 106:2.

Perhaps this sense of fearfulness might be understood as awe, or awesomeness. Thus God's awesomeness transcends all the praise that we might offer. Our awe of God, our comprehension of the extent of God's greatness and potential is limited by our very finite human capability.

In the Babylonian Talmud, R. Chanina said, "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear/awe (*yirat*) of heaven."[216] Here the Rabbis are struggling with the tension inherent between humanity's ultimate vulnerability and our power to affect the outcome of our lives. How do we balance God's awesomeness with our own obligation to take responsibility for our lives? If God's grace is the ultimate devisor, then where do human will and energy and creativity fit into the equation? Even if we were to believe that we could praise God sufficiently, the limitations on our capabilities are clear. Even if this entire work focused solely on praise and thanksgiving, it could never be sufficient. Yet the Rabbis counsel that our capacity to demonstrate awe before the Divine, unlike all other acts of even the freest of willful acts rests solely on our shoulders.

Other Areas to be Studied

In addition to the overarching question of the role of thanksgiving and praise in our life of prayer there were a number of other issues that were not fully explored in this process. A decision was made early on to narrow the focus in an attempt to effectively tackle the matters at hand. However, given the luxury of time, the following issues would have been more broadly addressed. How did the Rabbis understand that prayers were heard? How did they perceive that they were answered? A fuller study of the verbs associated with

[216] Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 33b.

hearing (sh'ma) and seeing (ra'ah) might have been explored, along with other notions of answered prayer including, deliverance (*hazil*) and healing (*rofeh*) and saving (*yishuah*). God reminds us in Exodus, *"I will respond to their prayer if they cry out to Me."*[217] The psalmists text *r*ead regularly through the month of Elul, addresses this urging*: Have mercy (chanani) on me and answer me (v'anayni).*[218] A broader understanding of how the Rabbis understood that prayers were heard and answered would be explored.

Carol Ochs offers us an understanding of the role of silence in our ability to hear and to discern God's communication with us. A fuller discussion of this issue and the power of other non verbal aspects of prayer, particularly music and mediation, might have deeply enhanced the completeness of this Thesis. In the research process much work was done on the essence of silence as an effective and powerful tool for accessing the Divine. However, this work never made it into the final version.

The important issues of the relationship between fixed texts and rituals (*keva*) and the intentionality (*kavanah*) of the pray-er also deserved significant additional consideration. We have touched on this matter as we explored the need to come before the Divine with a sense of honesty and deep intentionality, particularly around the recognition of God's graciousness in all matters of substance. The inherent relationship between ritual and the matters of our heart, between freely offered prayers and halakichly inspired rituals might add great value to this work.

One of the motivations of working on this particular aspect of our Jewish lives was to attempt to better understand the role of prayer. What has emerged is that for certain, prayer is by definition only one mode of many by which human beings enhance their relationship with

[217] Exodus 22:22.
[218] Psalms 27:7.

God. Yet, the articulated yearnings of our biblical ancestors and the commentaries of the Rabbis provide textual evidence of the workings of their hearts and their minds. We must consider the role of prayer as one piece of our Jewish lives, critical to our ability to function in the world, critical to our ability to engage and to live in dialogue with the Divine. It is Critical to our ability to reduce the infinite distance between us, as mortals, and the Creator of the universe. The Rabbis understood that prayer was only part of the equation, but a powerful instrument in removing the distance:

God is distant and yet near. How? R. Judah b. Simon said: From here [the earth] unto heaven is a journey of five hundred years; hence He is distant. When do we know that He is also near? A man stands at prayer and meditates in his heart and God is near unto his prayer, as it is said, *O Thou that hearest prayer unto Thee doeth all flesh come* (Ps. 75:3).[219]

In Conclusion- A Step Along the Way

According to the Rabbis, the world stands on three pillars, on Torah, on worship (*avodah*) and on acts of loving kindness (*gimilut chasadim*).[220] Without study of the Torah, without the discipline of the law, without the written communication from God, embodied by Moses in Torah, where would we be? The Rabbis believed that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts, would not be acceptable to God without the explicit actions of our limbs. In the Babylonian Talmud, the Rabbis teach that sin, 'Cannot be atoned for by a

[219] Deuteronomy *Rabbah* 2:10.
[220] Mishnah *Avot* 1:2.

sacrifice or a *minchah* offering, but can be atoned for with Torah (study) and acts of loving kindness.'[221]

The Rabbis understood that God is omniscient. There is nothing that needs to be revealed to God, for God in reality understands all, sees and comprehends all that is within our purvue, all that is within our hearts, all that is within our minds. The Rabbis conclude a talmudic teaching by recognizing and confirming this power, "The Creator sees their hearts together in (in one glance) and understands all their deeds."[222] So then we ask, what is the purpose of prayer and why do we as humans engage in this work. Do we pray for the benefit of God or do we pray for the benefit of ourselves? The interrelationship between humanity and the Divine is so complex that understanding where one begins or ends is nearly impossible to comprehend.

As was noted in the introduction, a true relationship with the Divine, like any true relationship may never be stagnant. It requires work and engagement if it is to be truly relational. It was my intention when choosing a topic for study that the work would be spiritually compelling, that it would by definition bring me closer to God. Writing a thesis is by definition challenging and tedious work, however what has emerged from this study has been transformative. Soloveitchik teaches:

The foundation of prayer is not the conviction of its effectiveness but the belief that through it we approach God intimately and the miraculous community embracing finite man and his Creator is born. The basic function of prayer is not the practical consequences but the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of God and man.[223]

[221] Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 18a.
[222] *ibid*.
[223] Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, 35.

I also believe that the relationship has the potential over a lifetime to be transformed from fellowship to love. From initial infatuation to the deepest and most stable, resilient and unrelenting eternal love. This Thesis has not even begun to touch on the capacity and the potential of the love of Man for God, nor the love of God for man. I understand that life of prayer and study facilitates and supports a true relationship with the Divine, and that this relationship must develop over time. As David is quoted as saying in the *Midrash* on Psalms:

Do you think that in exalting the Holy One, blessed be He, with all these praises, I have touched upon even one tiny portion of the multitudes of myriads of the glories of the Holy One, blessed be God? At this moment I am only at the beginning of my praise to God.[224]

Our relationship with the Divine, warps and grows over a lifetime, it is indeed the 'zig zag' of our lives. Ultimately it will end as all mortal lives end, and if our prayers are answered, perhaps we will not be afraid. I lack even the words to begin to express my appreciation, however, I do know that I too am only at the beginning. I am appreciative beyond measure, singing praises and awed by the infinite wonder of God's reality. I will continue forever to seek God's grace that I might continue to know God better as I begin my formal service of the Divine. I too pray that God will hear my prayer.

[224] Midrash Psalms 104:2.

POST SCRIPT

As I was preparing my final edits to this Thesis, I learned that my colleague Rabbi Ann Landowne had lost her husband. He died of a heart attack while running near the home that he loved. This work is a tribute to his memory, for few things in life might remind us more clearly of our vulnerability, the preciousness of God's grace and to treasure each and every day that we are granted.

6

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