

The Routine-ness of Prayer

Recently, R. Shmuel has been focusing in his sichot on prayer as spiritual practice. And the usual complaint about the "routine-ness" of prayer is a central part of the discourse. I think that this problem reflects a mistaken view about prayer.

Often we think of prayer as "talking to God". So let's imagine that we call a close friend at regular times and read to them the following script:

If you missed the last time, you have to read it twice. And if you didn't read it with *feeling*, you have to read it again. I admit, this would be routine. Really, it would be ridiculous.

But is this the right model? Let's think of another model: sex. Its true they say that spontaneity keeps a marriage going, but really sex is more or less the same every time. And yet most of us most of the time don't say "this routine sex thing is really boring." Interim conclusion: "talking" isn't the right paradigm for prayer.

But sex isn't the only model of intimacy. Talking, in fact, is a central mode of intimacy. True, we don't say exactly the same things each time, but the *overall structure* of intimate speech is pretty routine: around the Shabbat table or over a drink or on a late night walk. And such speech always consists of one person saying something, the other responding, and so on. And the truth is that the subjects we talk about and the things we say are pretty routine. But intimate conversations with people close to us are hardly boring. They're some of the most interesting and meaningful things we do.

I think the paradigm for understanding prayer is *acts of intimacy*. Prayer should vary in quality and in intensity from meaningful talk with a friend to sex.

If so, the words of the Amidah are not a script we read but the defining lines of an "overall structure", a context, a place, in which acts of intimacy take place. They're pillars holding the roof and marking the boundaries of a sacred space in which we meet God. The rhythms and sounds of those words tile the floor and

decorate the walls. The words carry meanings, ancient and modern, mystical and rationalistic, personal and public and these illuminate the room and cast shadows. The space is alive, dynamic, mysterious: you can't grasp the whole thing at once and one who looks carefully never sees the same place twice.

Inside this space we seek God. Maybe we prepared something to say. Maybe we just came to the space. But what we actually say, feel and hear reflects what's happening in the corner we happened to cast our eyes *this time*, maybe how a shadow cast by זוכר חסדי אבות (1) concealed ומחיה ומצמיה ישועה (2) and left, just for a moment, מלך ממיה (3) standing ominously alone. Or maybe today Avraham and Yitshak appeared in their Kabbalistic dress, and God as Queen and Lover embraced us with both arms in אלוקי אברהם אלוקי יצחק...הא"ל הגדול הגבור (4). Or maybe the news caster announced the latest round of "holy" violence just before the "minhah!" call pulled us back into the beit midrash, and we spaced-out until finally crying out to the מלך אוהב צדקה ומשפט (5) that He should take control and rule over us. *Take* the depth and complexity of what the tradition, in all its streams, says about the Amidah, *multiply that* by the totality of your own thoughts, feelings and associations, and the *sum total* represents the possibilities of meaning and experience that *you* bring to this space. Nobody can calculate the possibilities open to S/He who awaits you there.

The architecture, the layers of meaning, the rhythms and sounds, the light and the darkness, the dynamic change: this space lacks no power or drama. But our presence is often lacking. The siddur is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. When its closed one can't guess how big the space inside really is. A lot of weights hold the siddur closed: We don't identify with the words. The structure of the prayers doesn't make sense. We can't concentrate for so long. These problems are systemic to our religious life. If we lack authentic religious discourse, if terms like God, Revelation and Prophecy don't say much to us, it'll be hard to figure out what we're saying in the words of prayer. If the *internal logic* of Torah and Mitsvot is not the foundation of our lives, it'll be hard to find ourselves in the *logic* which

structures the prayer. If we're not "living to pray", as R. Shmuel calls it, it'll be hard to develop our powers of concentration.

These are real problems. However, they're not caused by the "routine-ness" of prayer but by the limitations of our own religious life. *Opening* the siddur to reveal the magnitude of sacred space inside involves a *paradigm shift* regarding how we understand prayer and regarding the place of Torah in our lives. But the struggle itself to effect that shift may open a gate. We're taught that if we knock, sometimes the door is opened from the inside:

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Notes:

- (1) "Who remembers the loving kindness of our fathers and mothers"
- (2) "...and restores life and causes salvation to flourish"
- (3) "Who brings death". The realities faced by our ancestors may sometimes be quite frightening.
- (4) "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac...The Great and Mighty God..." Avraham and Yitshak, and the names "great" and "mighty" respectively, are understood Kabbalistically to symbolize the right and left arms, as it were, of the image of God. The beginning of the Amidah is sometimes understood in this context as a passionate embrace.
- (5) "King who loves righteousness and justice"