

Enhancing Prayer,
and thereby Faith and Spirituality,
in the Modern Orthodox World

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At the recent ChampionsGate V national leadership conference sponsored by Yeshiva University, the “Leadership Track” in which I participated, was dedicated to grappling with contemporary challenges to faith and spirituality in the Modern Orthodox Community. Aside from my professional interest in the topic concerning whether qualities so seemingly personal and idiosyncratic can be successfully and meaningfully transmitted to a large body of people, I also believe that faith and spirituality are the lynchpins to whether or not Modern Orthodoxy is a viable religious approach over the long haul.

The multi-faceted practical dimensions of faith and spirituality were explored over the course of several sessions at the conference, and suggestions made for trying to address at least some of the difficulties that participants felt were being experienced in this regard by their communities, families as well as themselves. In the past, some of the topics raised at the ChampionsGate conferences have become focal points for year-long thought, discussion and programming, and I certainly hope that thinking collectively and seriously undertaking to substantively improve the nature of Modern Orthodox belief and religious commitment will continue well beyond the July meetings in Florida.

If any one Mitzva is particularly bound up with faith and spirituality, it is prayer. It seems to me that the underlying assumptions of three specific Halachot associated with the Amida (the Silent Devotion), the climax and cornerstone of each Jewish prayer service, can serve as reference points for the mindset that ChaZaL assumed to be a prerequisite for engaging in prayer in a truly profound manner. Identifying such a mindset, and then determining approaches that can best engender, preserve and advance this type of sensibility should, in my opinion, serve as part of considerations of faith and spirituality that should inform our entire lives.

1) Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 90:1

The one who is praying should not stand on a bed or a chair or on a bench, even if they are no higher than three Tefachim (12”) (off the ground), and not on a high place, except if he is elderly or unwell or his intention is to cause his words to be heard by the congregation.

2) Ibid. 5

He should not pray in an open area like a field because when he is in a place that is “modest” (“Tzniyut”—enclosed?), the fear of the King¹ takes effect and his heart is broken.

¹ For a more prolonged discussion of the role of fear of God in prayer, see http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/728737/Rabbi_Jack_Bieler/Fear_of_God_and_Prayer

3) Ibid. 19

One should establish a place for his prayers, which he should not change without need. And it is insufficient that he establishes a single synagogue in which to pray, but rather within the synagogue that he has established (as his place to pray), it is necessary that there be for him a permanent place.

It is easy enough to understand that these three directives are simply intended to allow a person to concentrate as much as possible on what he is saying. If a person is not used to standing in a high place,² if he is in an open setting which is susceptible to interruptions due to passersby, animal life, or meteorological events, if he constantly changes his venue, sight lines and the congregants next to whom he prays, focusing on prayer which is difficult under the best of circumstances, will become well-nigh impossible. The extent to which ideally, the ability to focus one's attention on his prayers might even dictate whether one prays at all, is reflected in the following dictum of RaMBaM:

Mishneh Tora, Hilchot Tefilla U'Nesiat Kapayim 4:15

The intention of the heart, "Keitzad" (to what extent does it play a role in fulfilling the Commandment to pray)? Any prayer that is not accompanied with intention is not a prayer. And if a person prayed without intention, he should go back and pray with intention. If a person recognizes that his mind is confused and his heart troubled, it is prohibited for him to pray until his mind is settled. Therefore, a person who is returning from a trip and he is tired and troubled, it is prohibited for him to pray until his mind is settled. The Sages have said, "Let him wait three days until his mind is settled and cools, and only afterwards should he pray."³

But concern with intention is obviously not the focus of Ibid. 90:5, i.e., "the fear of the King takes effect and his heart is broken", and when one studies the bases of the other two Halachot, a different consideration apparently informs them as well. The Talmud justifies avoiding standing in a high place during prayer, not because of some sort of physical precariousness leading to mental distraction, but rather due to a spiritual consideration based upon a verse from Tehillim:

Berachot 10b

Said R. Yosi b'Rabi Chanina in the name of R. Eliezer ben Yaakov: A person should not stand in an elevated place and pray, but rather in a low place and pray, as it is said,

² Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 90:3 lists exceptions for professionals in certain situations where their concentration will most probably not be disrupted.

³ Hagahot Maimoniyot #20 notes that according to Tosafot, this is not the practiced Halacha since in general (even without having travelled) our intention during prayer is poor. In effect, this commentator suggests, the entire Mitzva would be rendered moot were we to insist upon appropriate intention. But that should not mean that we should simply ignore this entire dimension of the prayer experience. While our "successful" prayer experiences may be few and far between, nevertheless to pray with intention remains an ideal to which we must aspire. While we might not be in control of our internal states of mind, any external impediments that might disrupt prayer like being in a perilous or strange environment obviously should be eliminated wherever possible.

(Tehillim 130:1) “From the depths I have called You, HaShem.” It is taught by the Rabbis in a similar vein: A person should not stand upon a chair, a bench or an elevated place and pray but rather in a low place and pray, because there is no “loftiness”/“exaltedness” before God,⁴ as it is said, “From the depths I have called You, HaShem.”

And with respect to the concept of “Makom Kavua”, the Talmud references a practice attributed to Avraham:

Berachot 6b

Said R. Chelbo that R. Huna said: Everyone who establishes a place for his prayer, the God of Avraham will Assist him. And when he passes away, they say concerning him, “What a humble individual! What a pious individual! He was among the students of our father, Avraham!” And concerning Avraham, how do we know that he had a permanent place (for prayer)? Because it is written, (Beraishit 19:27) “And Avraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood (“Amad)) there,” and the term “Amida” (in the Bible) (often) connotes prayer, as it is said, (Tehillim 106:30) “VeYa’amod Pinchos and he prayed.”⁵

The common denominator of these three sources associated with prayer is that in addition to making sure that the pray-er is positioned in such a manner that he will hopefully be able to concentrate on what he is saying, the cognitive experience must be accompanied by an equally profound affective component that entails realizing a) one’s existential weakness when left to his own devices and his very real dependency upon God,⁶ b) a sense of God’s Immanence and the resulting personal smallness⁷ that comes about when one is in an enclosed space rather than out in the open, and c) the determination to incorporate prayer in one’s life to the point where there is a single place to which a person returns when he prays “early and often,” as opposed to approaching prayer in a haphazard and irregular fashion.

⁴ While some individuals when compared to fellow human beings, have attained outstanding levels of achievement and notoriety, when standing before God, such status becomes irrelevant since God is so much Greater than anything that one of our species can achieve.

⁵ Although “VaYipallel” should more likely be interpreted as “and he judged”, the root “P-L-L” is also very much associated with prayer because of the reflexive form of the verb, “VaYitpallel.”

⁶ MaLBIM on Tehillim 130:1 notes that even if one has experienced material and physical success and feels that he is standing “on top of the world”, his spiritual inadequacies and transgressions that have distanced him from God should result in an attitude of lowliness at least during times of prayer.

⁷ RaMBaM captures this particular state of mind when he describes the sensibility of fear of God:

Mishneh Tora, Hilchot Yesodei HaTora 2:2

...And when he thinks about these things (i.e., how amazing the various aspects of God’s Creation actually are), immediately he trembles, steps backwards and is fearful and realizes that he is a tiny, lowly insignificant creature who stands with an inferior incompetent mind before the Perfect Intelligence...

Whereas the members of the Modern Orthodox community, by virtue of so many of them having benefited from a day school education and the availability of fine translations and transliterations of the prayers that comprise the services throughout the year are more than capable of fulfilling the cognitive aspect of prayer should they so choose, the portion of this Mitzva that demands that we realize that we are standing before God, that we are deeply humbled by the realization of in Whose Presence we are standing, and that we are expected to return again and again to reexperience and thereby recall the personal limitations that being in God's Presence call to mind, is largely absent from MO shuls and schools. Speaking recently with a colleague about day school prayer services, I was told that because these students' lives are so comfortable, they have difficulty articulating what they "need." I responded that in addition to "Bakasha" (request), prayer is also about "Hoda'ah" (thanksgiving). What about impressing upon these young people their need to express appreciation for the situations in which they find themselves? Furthermore, even if one, Baruch HaShem, is not presently confronting daunting difficulties of health, mortality, maintaining employment, etc., shouldn't prayer involve pleading that our admittedly positive situations not deteriorate and change dramatically? But again this would require someone not only to understand the words of prayer, but also truly believe that God is directly Involved in his life and the lives of those dear to him. Working to bring about not only shuls that allow congregants to concentrate, but also promote a sense of meaningful relation with God will hopefully be one of the foci of the continuing discussions that were begun at this past ChampionsGate conference. If faith and spirituality can be enhanced within the context of the prayer experience, there is the real possibility that such sensibilities will spill over into other dimensions of our lives.