

GASHMIUS

VOLUME VI: PRAYER

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WHY PRAYER?

Jonah Mac Gelfand

For each volume of Gashmius, the editorial team puts together an introduction that we hope familiarizes the reader with either a main component of neo-Hasidism in general, or the central themes of that particular collection. It often takes on some level of "authority," as it is attempting to articulate our organization's understanding of 'progressive neo-Hasidism.'

This introduction will be different.

Prayer is not a topic about which we feel we can speak authoritatively. It is too personal, too resistant to generalizations.

To that end, this introduction will not be expressed in the third person as an "authoritative" editorial team, but in the first person, as one individual's reflection on trying to live a neo-Hasidic prayer life.

Hello. My name is Jonah, and I am the editor-in-chief here at Gashmius.

We chose this topic of prayer as an attempt to bring our publishing from the realm of *ideas* into the realm of *devotional action*. After all, Reb Meshullam Feivush of Zbarazh (1742-1794) wrote that "the prerequisite for holy learning is fiery and connective prayer!" [1]

So where does prayer fall into our attempts to embody a neo-Hasidic spirituality?

For me, it is fraught. I share my

All endnotes and citations are available on our website gashmius.org

struggles and yearnings below in hope that my experience might offer some support to others trying to walk this path.

From the first time I read Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* as a college student, I was struck by its description of higher states of consciousness attained through Jewish practices. It was instantly clear to me that prayer would have to become central to my life if I wanted to encounter God in the way described in those pages.

But first I had to learn how to pray! I spent years alone in my room, relearning my childhood Hebrew, and slowly working my way through the traditional *siddur* ("prayer book"). Eventually I started integrating myself into textually-fluent communities where I could absorb through osmosis. I believed that I had to know the most traditional version of the prayers before I could experiment with them, or try to induce a spiritual moment through them.

So each morning, I got up and prayed.

But was I really *feeling* anything during those prayers? Did I touch any sense of holiness, or was I just going through the motions by rote in an attempt to prove to myself that I knew the "right" thing to do?

And throughout those years of learning the words of the siddur (which very much continues to this day), I kept reading stories and teachings about the prayer experiences of Hasidic rebbes and teachers.

I read about how the hasidim used prayer as an avenue toward the state of *devekus* (a "fusing" or "flushness" with the Divine). I read about how this goal of *devekus* is related to *mochin d'gadlus*— an expanded state of consciousness

— which is the opposite of *mochin d'katnus*— the constricted consciousness in which we live most of our lives. Practically, Reb Shefa Gold (b. 1954) explains that "when I am in *Devekus*, my perspective is enlarged; my source is established; my foundation is made firm; my sense of humor is intact; and Love becomes my guide in all actions." [2] *Devekus* as a result of prayer therefore becomes the fertile ground through which we experience the Divine, and then we can translate that experience into the rest of our lives.

But I also learned that there is a precariousness to this intensity. I heard about how Reb Uri of Strelisk (1757-1826) would kiss his family goodbye each morning before going to synagogue, just in case his soul expired during prayers. [3] That's how powerfully the hasidim say we should be giving ourselves to prayer. Could I really buy into that? Is that even what I want? Is my desire for the Divine strong enough to offer myself without a care if I return? When I read of a bar so high for defining *devekus*, it is hard to say I've ever experienced something so profound.

Most radically— and perhaps,



Otem, In Eynem by Etai Rogers-Fett

read that Reb Pinchas of Koretz (1726-1791) taught that the literal substance of our prayers is Divinity. Since the hasidim teach that our souls are a literal piece of Divinity, [4] then the moment of prayer is understood as the part of the Divine contained within us reaching out and connecting to the part of the Divine that is beyond us. In that moment, "all is united — the one who prays, the Oneness to whom one prays, and the prayer itself, are all God." [5] I found myself wondering how I could integrate such intensity into my spiritual life and whether I believe in my prayers enough to even attempt to claim that practice.

I learned how Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014) distinguished his neo-Hasidic practice from the English term "praying." To him, the word "prayer" had too specific a meaning (coming from the Christian Latin, "to beg") to encapsulate what the rebbes meant when they spoke about the Yiddish term *davenen*. Although supplication is contained in the term *davenen*, it could also hold everything from praise, to lament, to joy, and everything in between. *Davenen*, Reb Zalman taught "is living the liturgical life in the presence of God" [6]— no matter what is present for you at that moment! Depending on the day, different words or themes might jump out during the recitation of our pre-written prayers.

But what about the days — perhaps more common than not for me— when nothing in the prayers jumps out to me? When I'm just going through the motions again? As Marcia Falk (b. 1946) writes, "I cannot pray with my heart if the words I am saying do not ring with truth for me; at the same time, some-

times all the words are wrong, and one must allow the heart to speak with silence.” [7] Sitting with that silence —or bringing in my own spontaneous words— is a skill I am still building.

And Falk raises an important question for me: what if the words are “all wrong”? If they don’t seem true in my life? How can I bless God as the one who “frees the captive” when I open my phone after prayer to see videos of mass deportation in the US? How can I believe that God “grants peace” as war and devastation spreads across the Middle East, South America, and Europe? How can I internalize that a loving God is the substance of my prayer when my *davenen* is distracted by these worldwide and seemingly never-ending horrors?

I wish I could give an answer.

But know— I am struggling with you.

And, yet, even as I describe it as a struggle, I smile knowing I can’t imagine my life without prayer. It has become a form of home for me; an ever-available oasis amidst the parched desert of our broken world. When I find myself overwhelmed, I open my *siddur* and lose myself in the flow of my ancestor’s words.

And when I *davven* with consistency, then every once in a while...I merit a glimpse. Sometimes it’s a single word jumping out to me; other times it’s a bird landing on my windowsill while I put on my tallis; or a single note of a melody sung in community. But suddenly everything clicks. And just for a moment, I *know* God is in the room with me. And that’s worth all my struggles.

May we all find our unique ways to reach out to the Divine so that we all merit those glimpses.

PRAYER

Amy Small-McKinney

What is it with light
I mean the kind that struggles through

My city window in winter
Spare and shy

& Then the dark how it creeps in
Shoves the spark away

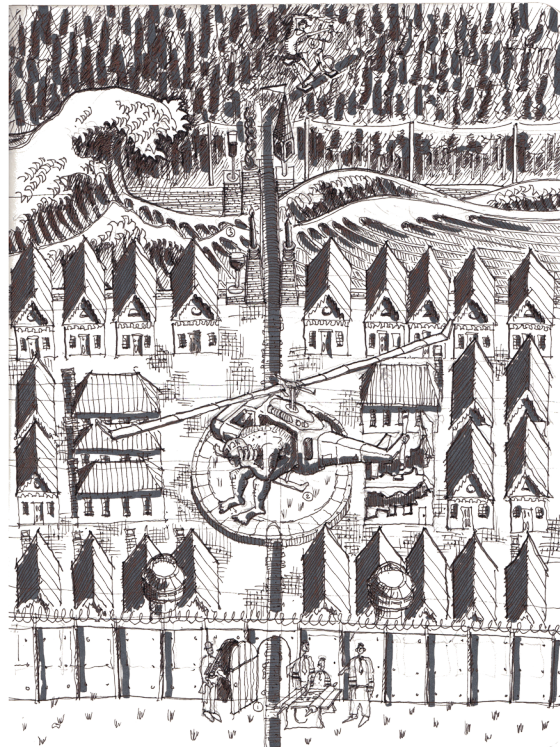
& I remember

My aging body is not a sun
Will not be returned someday

Well here I am Shekhinah. I am asking you:

Wrap me in your light one more time.
Let me wear the white shawl of light

For my child’s child and for the child
Still inside this old body.



Turzec, Belarus by Daniel Toretzky

PRAY LIKE A MOTHER

Lena Sclove

For a while after I had my first child, I worried I had stopped praying. That my previous depth of Jewish prayer experience was no longer accessible or possible. With time passing and wise supportive guides, I have come to see this season of life as not only not prayer-less, but rather fully prayer-infused. It looks different than classical Rabbinic mitzvot (“commandments”, “practice instructions”) and it also looks different than traditional prescriptions for women’s practice (or lack thereof). It has emerged from lived trial-and-error. This is the prayer of the everyday. I used to see the adjustments and modifications I was making to my prayer life as some kind of diminishment. Now I see that these are transformations and elevations.

Reb Zalman Shachter Shalomi z”l writes, “True prayer is a bursting forth of the soul to God.” [1] Having babies has changed how my soul bursts forth, but in ways that I have come to see as amplifications of the deepest essence of what prayer is.

TALLIS

My second baby is nearly five months old and is resisting breastfeeding with a cover over his head. He wants to see the world, he doesn’t want to miss anything. He eats best when his face is free to the air, able to glance around and take it all in. But sometimes I feel more comfortable covering myself in public, and so I have found the best way to meet both of our needs is by poking my head under the



Traveling Homeland (Admonition)
by Jeffrey Abt ©2026 Jeffrey Abt. All rights reserved.

cloth with him, creating a tent for us both. As he suckles, he stares up at me, and I stare down at him.

When I was ten or eleven, my mom took me to shul on Yom Kippur and we sat in the back. I saw an older man near the front, head covered in a *tallis* (“prayer shawl”), swaying fervently. “What is he wearing?” I whispered to my mom. “A tallit,” she said. “Why?” I asked. “Because he wants to be alone with God,” she said. “I want one,” I said. [2]

These days, the nursing cloth is my tallis. It cocoons around us, and the three of us—me, baby, and Hashem—are enveloped.

SHUCKLING

My baby likes movement to soothe and fall asleep. As he nurses, I rock forward and back, forward and back. His eyes grow heavy and he blinks away sleep, then... surrenders. But if I stop rocking, he rouses. And so I keep moving. Sometimes I switch, side to side. My attention becomes more focused. My breathing slows. My body drops down and in. When I *daven* (“pray”), I love to *shuckle* [3], to let the prayers ele-

vate through my body’s motion. These days, I rock my baby to sleep to similar effect.

TEFILLIN

I used to lay *tefillin* (ritual practice of binding head and arm with leather straps and boxes containing words of scripture). I began the practice at the start of the pandemic. *Davening* on zoom with geographically distant communities felt more embodied when I bound myself at home. I found comfort in being able to trace the Hebrew letter *shin* on the headpiece, the *dalet* at the base of my skull, the *yud* around my middle finger, which spell *Shaddai* (a name of the Divine that means “God The Breasted One,” and is associated with nurturance and abundance). [4]

After my first son was born, I tried to lay *tefillin* a couple of times, but found it challenging to breastfeed and rock the baby with all of the straps. Later when he started grabbing with his hands, he would pull the strands, the headpiece tumbling from my head, or the wrappings unfurling from my arm. At first I felt frustrated, and stubbornly clung to the practice as it had been, resisting more change. But the tedium of it got to me, and I tucked my *tefillin* set up on a high closet shelf, sad and a bit embarrassed I couldn’t keep it up.

Then, at a *davenen* leadership conference when my first was five months old, I was strapping him to my body with the cloth carrier before entering *shacharit* (“morning prayers”), and I felt as if the carrier was my *tefillin*, enshrouding my body with straps and buckles that bound me to my baby, and my baby to me. The comfort I had previously found from tracing *God*

The Breasted One on my arm now came from the warmth of a little one clasped to my breasts.

NIGGUN

Melodies come in the middle of the night, sometimes. Nursing a newborn creates a haze of fractured realities. Here and not fully here, there and also not quite there either. The *hevrayya* (“companions”) of the *Zohar* [5] found midnight a potent time for Torah study. [6] The *Shechinah* (indwelling, feminine divine presence) is particularly accessible then. For me, it’s often the time when loneliness descends. The ache of feeling like the only sentient being awake. Sometimes all that makes sense is wordless melody. It comes from sleep deprivation and over-extending, insufficient support and existential questions of parenting—am I enough? Am I what they need? How can I care for them and also this aching world, violent and hurting in ways that feel all the more hostile when looking at a tiny face? Sometimes tears spill over.

Reb Zalman writes about *niggun* (“wordless melody”) as a wellspring that is also the wellspring of *teshuvah* (“returning to God”). [7] These days, I don’t get very long in a *shul* (“synagogue”) service before baby or toddler needs to be tended to outside of the sanctuary. The collective singing of communal prayer that I love so much is something I hunger for—the type of hunger that only arises from a deprivation that is squelching something intimate and vulnerable within. But the power of *niggun* can be accessed anywhere that the heart is cracked open enough, and the mind is quiet enough, to let the notes overflow.

HITBODEDUT

To talk to a little baby is to express language knowing that it won’t be reciprocated in the same form. We say things to them knowing they aren’t processing it as understood units of language, but that on some level it is landing. The emotional tenor of the words, the tone of voice conveying valences of love and playfulness. I like to think that God hears my rambling musings like my baby hears me. Perhaps received not as a human ear with cognitive functioning would, but received, nonetheless.

This is the sacred art of *hitbodedut*, talking aloud in an intimate stream of consciousness to the divine. [8] In lieu of the right words, perhaps the desperation that a parent feels for the child to know how loved they are is enough. Knowing that the baby can never respond with the words, “I love you,” but can speak in other ways.

I used to walk in the woods and talk aloud to God, as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught me to. I didn’t hear a voice back, but I felt an emptying, often so complete that a forceful quiet would descend. A *yesh* (“somethingness”) would fill the *ayin* (“emptiness”). Now, I talk to my baby, sometimes aloud, sometimes in a whisper, and sometimes just in my own head if he is sleeping lightly and the risk of waking him is too high. I still talk to God too—there are things I need to say to The Divine that aren’t meant for a baby. But the experience feels similar—the need to convey and empty and express, regardless of a complete assurance that the message is being transmitted. The act of transmitting it is the prayer.

CONCLUSION: CALL MORE THINGS PRAYER

My second baby is crying his head off, overtired but resisting sleep. All my efforts to console him are for naught. Finally, I bring him up to bed, even though it is early for his bedtime. As I swaddle him, I know I need to soothe myself in order to be the grounding presence he needs to drift into peaceful rest. And what should come to my mind? A new melody for the *Barchu* (communal call to prayer). As I swaddle my baby, I feel as if a *minyan* (prayer quorum of at least ten people) of frazzled, unnerved parents joins me, lifting up a cacophony of communal prayer. Together. We are bending at the knee [9], in reverence saying, “I cannot do this alone.” I feel others who are relying on a relationship with the Holy One of Blessing to support them, and by doing so creating a safe haven for their children.

The Slonimer Rebbe [10] teaches that there are three levels of *emunah* (“trust”): trust of the brain, trust of the heart, and the highest rung of all is trust of the limbs. He writes that this trust of the limbs can’t be seized by fear, or anything really: there is Divine protection from above. This is the wholeness of “when a person is saturated in trust until the point at which their bones will say ‘*Hashem mi chamocha*’ (Yah, who is like you?) [11] with the entirety of their being, from foot to head.” [12]

In this moment, alone in my frenetic attempts to calm a distressed infant, all of my being surrenders to the need for spiritual help, the kind of balm that only a relationship with something more expansive can bring. This is a bow of full prostration to the mystery and closeness of an embodied trust. I suddenly see how prayer can come anytime. It can emerge through the

body, it can overflow in praise even in tough moments, and it can join the prayers of others near and far.

Now that I call more things prayer, the welcoming potentials of prayer continue to reveal themselves to me.

NOTE FROM AUTHOR:

We are living through times of horrific erasures of trans experience and rights, as well as the dangerous rise of rightwing traditionalist ideas and expectations about motherhood. To write about motherhood has always been political, and certainly is now. Therefore it is important to note that 1) not all mothers breastfeed, and 2) not all who breastfeed are mothers. In this particular piece, I am solely speaking from my own experience as a breastfeeding parent who also identifies as a mother. Additionally, my writing is not meant to discourage or downgrade the many people who breastfeed and/or identify as mothers while continuing to practice Rabbinic *mitzvot* in their “traditional” form, but rather to present parallel manifestations of prayer that have emerged through my personal practice. My *kavanah* (“intention”) with this piece is to open more pathways to enter embodied Jewish prayer, not to close any off. Finally, this piece was influenced by Dr. Mara Benjamin’s *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, ongoing elevating conversations with Reb Nadya Gross, early encouragement on this piece from Rabbi Yafa Chase, and with deep thanks to Reb Elliot Ginsburg for his continued wise guidance on interpreting and translating Hasidic and Kabbalistic texts. The title is inspired by Ocean Veong’s *Time is a Mother*.

NOAH’S WIFE’S PRAYER

Maya Bernstein

Can a woman be hatched? Dispatched?
Catch a jet stream, catapult east?
Where would she perch? Where
would she wait for the rain

to stop? Would she give up, fly home,
like the raven returning to the ark?
I too am a wooden world, overrun
with stir-crazy, flapping animals,

the dirty tasks of feeding them,
cleaning them. Beneath the pressure
of the grey sky, the dove inside waits
for a sign.



Traveling Homeland (Wishing)
by Jeffrey Abt
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THE REBBES AND THEIR MODES OF DAVVENEN: RABBI ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI TEACHES PRAYER WITH 'THE METHOD'

Netanel Miles-Yépez

In the mid-1980s, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014), *z"l*, better known as 'Reb Zalman,' made a twelve minute video of himself praying in the "modes" of various Hasidic rebbes of the past. [1]

Just over 60 years old at the time—his hair and beard a pearly white, curling white peyos framing his face—Reb Zalman, in a short-sleeved navy blue jumpsuit, stands and wraps his original 'rainbow *tallit*' [2] around himself and commences to *pray . . . perform . . . embody* a series of well-known Hasidic masters.

The video— known only to a few before Reb Zalman's passing in 2014— was eventually released and made generally available. [3] It was a decision that required some consideration, as Reb Zalman was himself ambivalent about it being seen.

Born in Zholkiew, Poland, in 1924, Reb Zalman was a Holocaust survivor who would leave his Belzer Hasidic roots to join the HaBaD-Lubavitcher Hasidim in New York. An early emissary of the 6th and 7th Lubavitcher Rebbes, he eventually broke away from Lubavitch to become one of the most significant Jewish teachers of the 20th and early 21st-centuries.

The founder of the influential Jewish Renewal movement, Reb Zalman attempted to infuse the

movement with Hasidic teachings and spiritual 'technologies' in a more expansive interspiritual *milieu*. Eventually, he was invited to Boulder, Colorado, to take up the World Wisdom Chair at the Naropa Institute in 1995, where I first met him as a graduate student in 1998.

One day, as we stood outside his office a few years before his passing—going through a rack of recordings of him on CD and DVD—he lifted up a DVD labeled "The Rebbes and Their Modes of Davvenen" and asked me if I had seen this recording from the 1980s. I told him that I had seen it. (I was then in charge of archiving his materials for the University of Colorado.) [4] He said that he believed the recording of him taking on the personae of various Hasidic masters was valuable, but was concerned that if it was not viewed with the proper attitude, it might be thought either disrespectful or comic. Ultimately, he trusted his own sincerity in making it and was willing to be ridiculed if it might benefit others in their own prayer-life.

The video in question opens

with Reb Zalman talking about our "root metaphors" for engaging God in prayer, saying:

Every time a person faces God, there is a mirroring going on. I 'mirror' the God I place myself before. If this God is 'exalted,' I mirror the exaltation; because, after all, what are names of God except 'root metaphors' to set up relationships?

If I call God 'Adonai' — 'Lord'—a powerful master stands before me. If I call God with the name 'Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh' —all-pervasive, ever-present being— then I become another one vis-a-vis that name of God. If I say 'Shaddai,' I feel that power, that control that is divine (and that is the mezzuzah). And if I want to say 'Yah!' . . . there is another outcry to that which reaches me with 'Wah!' from God—Yud-Heh Vav-Heh. [5]

That is to say, there is an internally felt response to '*placing ourselves before*' different aspects of God: if the God is "exalted," we might also feel "exaltation." The 'reference' for these various states is 'resident' in us, and only needs



still from video, courtesy of the Yesod Foundation

to be ‘accessed,’ as a Method actor might do, identifying with and experiencing a character’s inner motivation and emotions.

Having made this point, Reb Zalman then attempts to ‘feel’ into the archetypes of various Hasidic masters, demonstrating styles of *davvenen*—praying as if truly in the presence of God, *nokhah p’nai HaShem*—as it might be expressed through those archetypes. As a short preface, he says:

Often, when I teach about Hasidic masters, I find that for all the teaching, and for all the things I have to say, and for all the things that I quote in their holy names, there is still something missing; because there is a way in which I have gotten to know who those masters are that expresses itself in prayer. [6]

This was a belief that Reb Zalman expressed frequently when speaking about Hasidic masters. Most often, he expressed it in the following manner:

If you really want to know what a particular rebbe was like, you have to know four things: their divrei torah (“teachings”), their sippurim and ma’asiot (“stories and tales”), their niggunim (“melodies”), and their davvenen (“prayer”). [7]

Often, Reb Zalman went further, quoting the Apter Rav, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt (1748-1825), “If you want to learn to pray, you have to learn it from a praying person.” [8]

But in all this talk of “prayer,” Reb Zalman is referring specifically to *davvenen*, as noted, and not *t’fillah*.

The Hebrew word *t’fillah*, of course, refers to *formal* ‘prayer’: the thrice daily rabbinic obligation to pray the Jewish liturgy. But the

Yiddish word *davvenen*, according to the *Hasidim*, is something else: *davvenen* is to pray with one’s entire being, to become personally involved in the prayer, thus fulfilling the Torah commandment to ‘cry out when we have a need.’ [9] *T’fillah* is something that can be accomplished *without* such personal involvement; *davvenen* can never be accomplished without it. *Davvenen*, according to Reb Zalman, was ‘tuning to the divine.’ [10]

Here, Reb Zalman creates a situation in which we can witness him—as “a praying person”—‘tuning to the divine’ in the imagined personae of various Hasidic masters of the past. Thus, Reb Zalman goes on to ‘embody’ seventeen different Hasidic masters, as if inspired by each, one at a time:

Yisrael ben Eliezer, the Ba’al Shem Tov (1698-1760); Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch (1704-1772); the Alter Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812); Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740-1810); Elimelekh of Lizhensk (1717-1786); Ya’akov Yitzhak, the Hozeh of Lublin (1745-1815); Zvi Hirsh of Zhiditchov (1763-1831); Uri, the Seraf of Strelisk (1757-1826); the TzemaH Tzedek, Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch I (1789-1866); the Yid HaKodesh, Ya’akov Yitzhak of P’shiskah (ca. 1766-1814); Simkhah Bunem of P’shiskah (ca. 1765-1827); Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859); Mordechai Yosef of Ishbitz (1801-1854); the Apter Rav, Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt (1748-1825); Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1810); Shlomo of Bobov II (1908-2000); and the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak of Lubavitch (1880-

1950).

For Reb Zalman, each *rebbe* was a unique personality, with a distinctive style of *davvenen*, often expressing vastly different religious sensibilities. There was no flattening of them into conventional or homogenized ‘saintly’ modes.

Indeed, the last two rebbes ‘embodied’ were actually figures he knew personally, and to whom he had attached himself as a Hasid in his youth. Particularly significant is his ‘embodying’ of this last *rebbe*—the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn—who was his own most intimate and beloved *rebbe*. In this act, we have the opportunity to witness something beautiful: a Hasid ‘re-member-ing’ his own *rebbe*, more than thirty years after his death.

Reb Zalman, as Hasid, takes on the ‘affect’ of his *rebbe*, as he exists in his “cellular memory”—a practice that Sufis call *tasawwur-i murshid*—and embodies him in prayer. This is especially significant, as Reb Zalman often spoke of how, as a young CHaBaD-Lubavitcher Hasid, he would watch the *rebbe* in his *davvenen* and experience a ‘mirroring’ of the *rebbe*’s ‘mode of *davvenen*’ in his own body.

The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, as is well-known, was partially paralyzed after his imprisonment by the Communist government. This affected his speech and mobility, slowing and modifying how he could *davven*. But so focused were the *Hasidim* on their *rebbe*, that they too slowed and modified their *davvenen* to match his, experiencing a kind of “sub-muscular movement,” a pattern or gestalt of the *rebbe*’s *davvenen* in their own bodies, which they used to “tune-in to him,” thus enhancing and upleveling their own *davvenen*. [11] This

type of practice is perhaps the entire point of Reb Zalman's demonstration.

Reb Zalman ends with this statement:

I hope that, somehow, you can see something inside of your neshamah ['soul'], in this whole palette of possibilities of stances before the 'Living God' that speaks to you. Often, for me, it is just like this . . . to be able to say . . . 'Rebboina shel Olam ['Master of the Universe'], I thank you so much, for this opportunity, and for this medium, and for these possibilities that you have opened up to us, so that we can communicate with one another through electronics and make a connection, that allows me and the person who sees this to say, Omayn ['Amen].' [12]

In the end, I believe Reb Zalman's original impulse was justified. The video has been much appreciated and stands as a testimony to how a *davvener*—which is how Reb Zalman understood himself—can invest in prayer, with truth and authenticity, comparable to the truth and authenticity that Lee Stasberg helped young actors to find in the Actors Studio. The good actor, like the committed *davvener*, is not 'faking' it, they are 'finding' that it already exists in them. Everything human and divine is there within us, a spiritually-encoded 'DNA' that allows us to access every dimension of being and to reflect it back to God in prayer.

But for me, the true beauty of this video will always be Reb Zalman's humility in the moment of discussing it with me, in his willingness to be 'seen,' or even ridiculed over it . . . if it served others in the search for God.

INTENTIONS AND UNIFICATIONS (A POETIC PROSE)

Hillel Zeitlin (translated by Eitan Zemel)

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Below, I have translated the first three stanzas of Hillel Zeitlin's prose poem *Kavanot v'Yihudim* ("Intentions and Unifications"). I have attempted to keep the language close to the Hebrew rather than pushing to prioritize meaning, similar to how Rosenzweig approached his translations of the poems of Yehudah Ha-Levi. My goal is not to translate a form of bare affect or to plot into a colloquial English, but rather to try and bring over Hebraisms that might expand English itself. My work cannot be read as Zeitlin's words, but rather as a work that stands on its own, acting in relation to Zeitlin but as a separate entity. However, in my translation choices, I have tried to keep the language to evoke a similar form and color the content accordingly. For example, I have chosen throughout to translate the word *hineini*, or "Here I am," as "Here," rather than elliding it as some others have. [1] Its repetition lends a certain rhythm to the text. Though not necessarily changing the straightforward meaning, it recalls a Biblical assertion of individuality and here-ness before the divine, such as with Abraham's response to God in Genesis 22. The themes of individuality in prayer and relationship to God recur throughout the poem. As a formal choice, I have retained spacing between paragraphs, quotation marks, ellipses, and words with spaced letters from the original.

Our author, Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), was born in Poland into a Hasidic family in the second half of the 19th century. Early in his life, he became very interested in non-Jew-

ish and/or secular thinkers such as Dostoyevsky, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Tolstoy, as well as Zionist thinkers such as Ahad Ha'Am, Berdichevsky, and Brenner, of whom he was a close friend. Politically, he was initially attracted to Zionism before rejecting it for Territorialism after attending a Zionist congress.

Later on in life, Zeitlin returned to Hasidism and Kabbalah, working for many years on an uncompleted translation of the *Zohar* into Hebrew before his murder in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. He sought to establish a new Hasidic movement that would not be limited to traditional Rabbinic thought, instead engaging with all of the art and knowledge of the world. He forged a path that we still follow today, not necessarily living in traditional Hasidic communities, but still learning from the teachings of Hasidic masters alongside the teachings of the rest of the world.

This prose poem, originally in Hebrew, has never been translated. It was originally published in 1903 in the almanac and literary magazine *Luah Akhi'asaf* in Warsaw. The below translation is of the first three of a total of fifteen sections.



INTENTIONS AND UNIFICATIONS

(A Poetic Prose)

A.

Here I pray and the trees pray with me.

Here I bend and they bend with me, here I bow and they bow with me.

One tree, high and exalted, stands before me. He lowers his head, arches his height, he bends and sways, bends and sways.

He bends and the rest of the trees bend after him, he bows and they bow after him. He is a *shaliah tzibbur* ("prayer leader").

The congregation and their *hazzan* ("cantor") are adorned with prayer shawls of *full tchelet* ("blue thread in *tzitzit*"), and their *tzitzit* drag across the ground.

The trees bend and bow and the grass with them too. The community prays and the school children are with them...

When the *hazzan* blesses, the congregation and the children respond with all their might: "*Amen yehei shmei raba m'varakh l'alam ul'almei almaya.*" ("Amen, let the great name be blessed forever and for all eternity.")

And we pray with him with fear and love, with great intention, with a special devotion of wonder.

And with "*echad*" (one) we have the simple intention, that God is one and God's name is one, that all is one, that all the changes and the differences, the divisions and the contradictions, the opposites and the refutations, the substitutions and the transformations are simply illusions...

And we do not excess in private intentions, because we engage a single communal one: that it is not just the T O R A H in full that comprises the names of God, but rather the whole W O R L D.

And we do not bother our ruler with many requests, as we are only asking for: "*Sim shalom, tovah u'vrakha, hayim hein hesed v'rahamim.*" ("Place peace [over the world], goodness and blessings, life grace kindness and mercy.")

B.

If when home, it is good to pray with the windows open too, here *Psukei D'Zimra* ("Morning Songs of Praise") is good only when said in a valley or on a mountain.

The heavens and all of their hosts, the trees and the currents, and waters and all kinds of grass, the animal and the beast, the insect and the bird and all the angels of song, here they are before you, before your eyes.

It is good to sing in a choir. It is good to say *Psukei D'Zimra* with the choirs of those who dwell above and those who dwell below all together.

"Horn, harp, and lyre," "lute and pipe," and all the "resounding cymbals" (Psalm 150) — they are unnecessary, the choir sings beautifully without any of these instruments.

It is not uncommon to hear the voice of the shepherd's flute. There is the one whose clear and refreshing voice spills out into the wonderful melody: but there is also the shepherd's flute that is a marring voice, and it disturbs the oneness of the melody.

"Even the good and beautiful man is here just a man. He does not have the purity nor the innocence of the rivers and the stars."

"Here I love to praise God with the heavens, the angels, the sun, the moon, and the stars, the fire and the water... but I do not love to praise along with the young men and the maidens alike, the children and the elders." (Psalm 148)

I love to say *Psukei D'Zimra* with the congregation, but only with a created congregation that has not tasted the taste of sin.

Here, my desire is to forget the children of man, their unfortunate mire and impurity, standing in the palace of worldly song, in the palace of Origin, in the field blessed by God.

C.

Out of all of the blessings, here I love the blessings for the thunder and the blessing for the rainbow.

She is a beautiful Origin of calm and serenity, but she is also endlessly beautiful in fury and wrath.

Thunder and noise, cloud and fog, storm and tempest, fire and hail, blast and flow - they are special jewelry for a bride we call 'Origin.'

And in donning these ornaments, she will show to our eyes all, in scale and splendor, might and power.

And beneath those manifestations, there might be moments that Origin will show as overwhelming white-faced beauty, here she will show in fury as a dark-faced graceful woman, and the darkness will add on a special adornment.

And there are those manifestations without darkened faces, because if they are too dark, they are dark like the Tents of Kedar.

And they blacken her face more and they were like the black wings of death.

And like all manifestations of blackened face, yes she will become beautiful, yes she will fill with splendor, she will become high and exalted.

And like all where she will show wrath and fury, like all whom she will scare and frighten, yes she will grasp the hearts of those watching and gazing upon her beauty and splendor.

And in her wrath and fury, there are those manifestations that will wear her face of awful sadness, and her cries are like a poor orphan, and with her tears she fills the spring and river, field and garden, valley and mountain.

And her tears transform into gemstones on the tops of stems, on the cups of roses, on the blades of the branches, on the wings of the bird, on the insect and the bug.

And the Origin cried without rest and her tears were pregnant with every furrow and flowerbed, every plant and flower, every thirst and flutter.

And she cries more and washes away the dirt of the land and fills every nook and cranny, every pit and hole, all the grooves of the fields.

Or, there are some manifestations that will suddenly make her face shine, and they wore joy and she will show them the blissful daughter of laughter.

And now, the Origin wore her precious clothes and she donned colors and shades, and the R A I N B O W she will show...



Dos Visn Otempt by Etai Rogers-Fett

EIGHT PATH - WAYS OF PRAYER

Rabbi Shefa Gold

Our prayer practice is a Path of Love.

But there are so many challenges to love that we must meet.

Thankfully, we have inherited an ancient treasure that can be excavated, refined, polished, and made useful in meeting the challenges of our day. To that end, we will journey with deep inquiry and profound celebration through eight themes that represent the means by which we meet those challenges on the Path of Love:

Gratefulness, Praise, Lament, Supplication, Exaltation, Revelation, Comfort, and Encouragement.

I invite you to open this treasure, and use our sacred texts to explore these pathways, opening to the magic and the medicine of our inheritance.

THE PATHWAY OF GRATEFULNESS

When I step on to the Pathway of Gratefulness, I open to receive the flow of blessing AND I am connected with the Source of that flow. Gratefulness opens up the possibility of a profound and transforming relationship with the gift of Creation and Incarnation.

The Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart said that “If the only prayer you ever say is ‘Thank You’ that would be enough.” [1] Yet I still need to say or sing that prayer. It’s not enough just to *feel* gratefulness.

So much of our liturgy is about gratefulness because through the process of uncovering that quality, I gain access to the energy that

I need for my spiritual practice. On the Pathway of Gratefulness, I let the words of prayer send me, and then I let all those words go. (Imagine a multi-stage rocket launching into outer space, leaving behind its launch-pad, dropping each of its now empty burned out boosters, continuing on to meet the unknown with a lighter payload.)

The flow of Gratefulness begins with a sense of surprise. You might be stopped in your tracks by a rainbow or a sunrise or the most ordinary sight of a child playing or your partner deep in thought. Unexpectedly, the beauty, poignancy, sweetness and depth of a moment touches you and you are suddenly ALIVE; the world around you takes on a shimmer and a mystery.

Beginning in surprise, gratitude gradually expands into a sense of wonder. When you are in a state of wonder, you remember what a miracle this life is. You are able to actually enjoy the absurdities; you let yourself be astounded by the enormity of Creation; your mind is blown by synchronicities, coincidences, and a glimpse of the infinite. Then your heart opens. From a state of wonder it’s impossible to judge another or commit a crime against this amazing Creation.

Gratefulness— beginning in surprise, expanding into wonder— blossoms into generosity as we look for ways to respond to this gift of life that we are given. Our eyes are opened to the suffering around us, and we realize that “we” are not separate from “them;” we are all a part of this gorgeous tapestry... and as even one thread unravels, the whole pattern is diminished. We stop judging one another and start serving each other. We look for ways to give, in response to how much we have received. The

Pathway of Gratefulness sends us to discover our innate generosity. This is how the world is healed.

THE PATHWAY OF PRAISE

Stepping on to the Pathway of Praise, I hear the song that all of Creation is singing to its Creator, just through its very BEING. When I hear that song, I am invited to join in. The final line of the final psalm, Psalm 150, sums up all the Psalms and says, “Let all souls, all who have breath praise God, *Hallelu-Yah!*” Our very breath, the life force that is moving in us, is a praise to its source. And the challenge is to make that praise/breath deliberate, intentional— yet without content or reason.

I praise in order to lose myself in the Mystery, to open to the unnamable. With each *Hallelu-Yah*, I am lifted up out of my small separate self into the larger Self that is united with the One. This experience is mirrored by Reb Pinchas of Koretz, who taught that “in prayer all is united – the one who prays, the Oneness to whom one prays, and the prayer itself, are all God.” [2] I sing to open the eyes of my heart that I might see the miracle that was, is and will be, always before me. I sing to give myself away.

To walk the Path of Praise means to magnify and glorify that glimpse of miracle that is given to me each morning in the dawning light of day, in the steady beat of my heart. I sing *Hallelu-Yah* to exalt and bless and celebrate the simple fact of existence.

Praise whittles me down to my essence, purifies me of trivialities, washes away my worries. Through praise, I remember who I am and what my life is for. In walking this Pathway of Praise I am trans-

formed. I am led from small-self-egoic tangles into Big-Self-spacious expanse.

The Pathway of Praise opens when I close the door to blame and complaint. In walking this path, I surrender my stories, my too-small identity, my grievances, and my certainties. I get out of the way and let God sing through me.

THE PATHWAY OF SUPPLICATION

I don't relate to God as some guy up there who will grant my wishes if I ask nicely or with enough fervor. I don't believe that I must prove that I am worthy or make some kind of deal with the Holy One of Blessing in order to get what I want or need. I don't believe in a God that withholds goodness from me, rewards my righteousness, or punishes me for my transgressions. So, in the past, I've mostly tried to avoid liturgy that seemed to be based on that old and worn paradigm of Big Daddy granting me favors.

And then I challenged myself to dive a bit deeper.

I remembered that we can't really understand a sacred text or receive its medicine until we have chanted it for a long-enough time, embodying that text through practice.

Through my practice, I learned that when I call out to God, the Great Mystery, from the place of vulnerability, with my whole heart, soul, and might... I am changed. God appears in the midst of my longing for Her.

In my reaching out, I am humbled and then connected to a place beyond the possible. My supplication does not have to be whiny; it is rooted in longing rather than lack; it can express profound dignity, subtlety, and depth. It is such a surprise that when I call out to God,

the Great Mystery, I am answered in the very moment of calling. My question seems to hold the answer in it. In calling, I remember what I am really yearning for, and the layers of form drop away, revealing the core and deepest longing for God- my longing is to be connected to that Mystery, to know myself as a spark of the Divine.

And in truth I am longing for that which I already have. It is only the quality of my call that reveals this truth to me.

THE PATHWAY OF LAMENT

I have always tried to be upbeat in my practice. I often frame my prayer as a form of affirmation to reprogram habitual negative thought patterns and build confidence. So, I am naturally drawn to Prayers of positivity that point my attention towards love, prayers that lift me up and help me step into a sense of possibility.

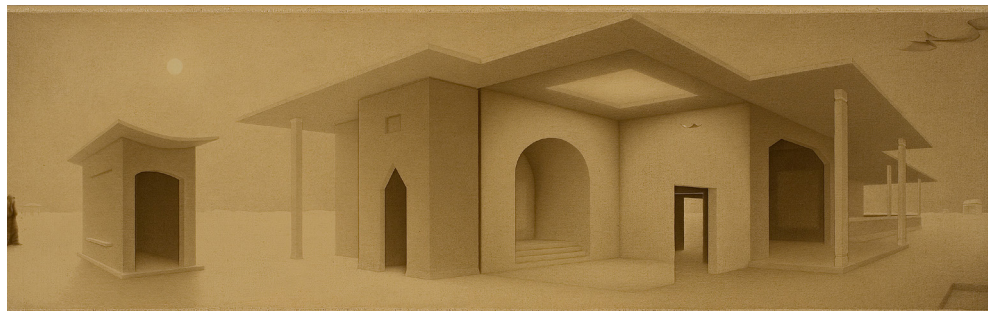
But as I dove into our sacred texts, I found that so many of them are prayers of lament, expressing deep anguish and desolation. I wondered, "How can I possibly pray these words? Won't they just sink me deeper into my own negativity?"

Then, I remembered that I was raised on the Blues. My older brother fell hard for black Memphis Blues, and that soulful mu-

sic became the soundtrack of my childhood. When I listen to and experience the Blues, I know that it is the groove, the rhythm, and the tone that move me. In that groove I hear the echoes of sorrow, yet what emerges from the music is resilience, vitality, persistence, tenacity, and strength in the face of oppression and persecution.

Our ancestors who composed the liturgy also experienced devastating persecution and loss; their response was expressed in song, poetry, dance, and story. After all, the Psalms were originally composed to be sung, not read. And these songs and psalms of Lament help us to identify with those who are suffering, awaken our compassion, and motivate us to respond to the needs of the oppressed.

The Path of Lament can guide me through the depth of my own suffering and send me to catharsis. In fact the Talmud uplifts the centrality of lament in our relationship to God by teaching that "all the gates [in heaven] are locked except for the gate of tears." [3] To which Reb Menahum Nachum of Chernobyl comments that after you have had that catharsis, you can "emerge joyfully, as you have merited a full return to the Divine." [4] Singing through the sadness will allow me to release the pain that I carry and find meaning in the struggle. The song will transform my wrestling



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into a dance.

THE PATHWAY OF EXULTATION

As we step onto the Pathway of Exultation, we are lifted up into a wide perspective; we are shown possibilities that surpass our imaginations; we are given glimpses of a larger Reality. On this path we are connected to an inner joy that is not dependent on outer circumstance. It is an inner joy that wants and needs to be expressed.

As we step beyond reason, this joy shatters cynicism and sends us to ecstasy, an ecstasy that is the experience of full surrender to the Life Force. In stepping onto this path, we also become profoundly vulnerable, and we risk being ridiculed by cynics everywhere— including the ones that reside within our own heads. Skeptics, doubters, and scoffers might attempt to keep us from walking this path. Yet we dare to shake off self-consciousness and venture forth into greater aliveness.

On the Pathway of Exultation our walk becomes a dance. Our exuberance becomes a healing force for a world that has numbed itself into complacency. On the Pathway of Exultation, we can delight in something as simple as the breath, the harmony of voices, the color of the sky, the solidity of the earth beneath this step. We can rejoice in a sense of connection with the cosmos, knowing that our small piece of the puzzle is welcomed and cherished by the whole.

THE PATHWAY OF REVELATION

Our liturgy is filled with insight and understanding, yet we cannot receive the revelation that is hidden in these ancient words until

we become receptive, open to their flow of wisdom and then be willing to apply that wisdom to our lives.

To walk the Pathway of Revelation, we must be willing to put aside what we think we know, and enter into the unknown. We must find our stillness in order to be sensitized to what is stirring within us. We must get quiet in order to hear the still small voice, the voice of the *Shechinah* (“Divine Presence”) who is always whispering to us.

And then the pathway of Revelation guides us into prophesy. We not only receive; we become channels for the Divine Flow. We offer ourselves up to that flow, with a commitment to be continually clearing out the obstacles and obstructions that might distort the Divine message.

God speaks to us through the holy words of our inheritance; She speaks to us through our bodies and through the stirrings of our hearts. As Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piasezner taught, “every awakening—even a purely physical one— is a key to the soul.” [5]

On the Pathway of Revelation, we open our eyes to these signs and wonders. The way to stay open is to listen for the “New Song” that is referenced in many psalms. [6] The practice of listening for and singing the “New Song” requires us to let go of what we know, to let go of habit and nostalgia ... and then to trust what is coming through us in this very moment. It means I must open my mouth and sing, without knowing what will emerge, and then follow that new melody with steadfast faith, going wherever the song wants to take me. Every melody tells a story; every story reveals a hidden treasure.

THE PATHWAY OF COMFORT

To walk the Pathway of Comfort is to know that we are held in the Divine embrace. God’s promise to us is so simple.

I hear The Great Mystery saying, “I am with you. I do not promise that it will be comfortable or that you will not suffer. I do not promise that you’ll never be hungry or feel despair. I do not promise that your heart will never be broken. My promise is simply that I am with you – in your suffering, your hunger, your despair, through your wandering, your stumbling, your confusion – (I am with you), ‘*Anokhi Imach*’ (Genesis 28:15) – even when you feel abandoned.”

On the Pathway of Comfort, our challenge is to receive that Presence; to stop thrashing and then let it hold us. To be comforted, we must lean into the Divine embrace, with trust that when our wounds are bound up, they will heal. When we know we are held, we let go of the illusions of control; we relax and open to beauty and blessing; and we expand into our true breadth. On this journey towards wholeness, we are accompanied by God as the Loyal Friend, who says, “I am with you every step of the way.”

The difficulty of walking this path is that we will be lured by false comforts that either numb or distract us. True comfort allows us to move through the painful passage, breathing through the contractions, as we birth a new life. True comfort allows us to know our grief as love.

And then, as we are comforted, we also become channels for the flow of that Divine comfort, pouring through us into this world.

THE PATHWAY OF ENCOURAGEMENT

The sufi poet Hafiz once wrote: "How did the rose ever open its heart and give this world all its beauty? It felt the encouragement of light against its being, otherwise we all remain too frightened." [7]

As we step onto the Pathway of Encouragement, we too must open to the light that will dissolve our fear and allow us to shine the truth of this moment, giving our unique beauty to the world. Without that encouragement, we might remain closed or too anxious to reveal ourselves fully. Every day presents us with a risk. The world may judge us, misunderstand us, or be too cynical to take us seriously. It takes courage to boldly step forward each day on our path to wholeness.

Encouragement nurtures our faith, resilience, and confidence. With encouragement we find calm, receive support, and remember our ultimate safety. With encouragement we feel embraced, known in our true vastness, and sent to fulfill our soul's purpose.

And then, on the Path of Encouragement, we can turn towards others as we lift up, support, and inspire them on their own unique journeys. We all need encouragement.

Our sacred texts deliver treasure after treasure of encouraging words that have inspired and sustained our ancestors through dreadful and harrowing times of trauma, oppression, and degradation. We can turn to those same treasures and plant those encouraging words within us to light the way and open our hearts that we might give the world our beauty.

ROSH CHODESH

Lisa Rosinsky

Mem hums, Shin hisses, and Alef is the Breath of air deciding between them

—Sefer Yetzirah

That's a C, not a U, she said again, impatient, and again I tried to please her, tried

to cup my hand correctly below my leaking breast. Surely my body

would not give me a body I could not feed. The nurse had other new mothers

to visit and here I was unable to make the right letter with my fingers, despite years

of scribbling the alphabet in new arrangements with these hands. God made the world

from words, according to my people, and in the holy book, I read there are three

mother letters: mem, shin, and alef, which stand for water, fire, air.

Mem hums, shin hisses, alef is the breath that decides between them.

It was the last dawn of the old moon, the thinnest scythe hovering in the sky

as I cut the cord myself: closed the scissors twice on thick tissue and stopped

the blood between our bodies. Held you dusky, squirming, on my chest, your skin

hot against my skin. Are you the psalm, or the page it will be written on? Am I

the hum, the hiss, the lungs, the breath? Whose body is the alphabet, and whose

the pen? Mem in the lips. Shin with the teeth. Alef from the voice, the tongue,

the slicing in between them. We breathed the darkness under a new moon together

on your first night—Rosh Chodesh, when we're closest to the mother-god,

so I listened for her name. I tried to mold my swollen breast into the right shape

to coax the milk into your mouth. The words came later, with study, and labor.

AS MUCH JOY AS POSSIBLE: THE ARI ON THE MATTER OF PRAYER

*Rabbi Micah Friedman and
Rabbi Jacob Chatinover*

INTRODUCTION

from Rabbi Micah Friedman

Lately, as my alarm sounds in the morning, my mind flutters with dread as I imagine what horrors await me in the headlines of Haaretz and the New York Times. In the moment of blurry consciousness when our tradition guides us to speak words of gratitude for the gift of another day of life, [1] my heart sinks as I read about the latest *chillul Hashem* (“desecration of G-d’s name”) from the hills of Judea [2] or the latest step in the ongoing war on American multi-cultural democracy. [3]

By the time I’m ready to consider *davennen Shacharis* (praying the morning service), I frequently find myself far from the mood that we are enjoined to echo each morning: *sichu b’khol nifle’osav* (“speak of all G-d’s wonders”), reads my prayer book, but a voice within me echoes lamentations for the crumbling of world order as we know it. How can I pray in such a state?

How are we meant to daven when darkness surrounds us and penetrates our hearts? How can *tefillah/davennen* (“prayer”) offer us guidance as we struggle to discern our role in the struggles of our moment? When the *siddur* (“prayer book”) seems beyond reach, a *sefer* (“book of Jewish wisdom”) can be a more emotionally accessible foothold.

Recently, I picked up a copy of

the *siddur* of Rabbi Isaac Luria (known as the Ari z”l), one of the most influential Kabbalistic teachers in Jewish history who led a circle of mystical practitioners in Tzfat in the 16th Century CE. In it I found a teaching about *tefillah* that I shared with my friend and chevruta. [4] We hope Luria’s advice can encourage us in our efforts to *daven* wholeheartedly and to build circles of community around shared commitment to *chesed* (“compassion”).

What drew me to this teaching was how Luria acknowledges that sadness, gloom, and grave concern for material conditions of life often present themselves as obstacles to prayer. At the same, he teaches that in order to open ourselves up to the transformative potential of prayer we must, somehow, move beyond gloom. So, how do we move ourselves from gloom to gladness?

At the end of the teaching, Luria references the *mitzvah* of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) and encourages us to share our concerns and struggles with those people with whom we pray and learn Torah. He locates the gateway to transcending the spiritual malady of dejection in the practice of cultivating loving relationships with those who share in our spiritual practices. In order to live by the words of the morning prayers that implore us to seek G-d’s face constantly, we need to attune ourselves to the faces and feelings of those with whom we gather to pray. When we situate our lives in circles of loving relationships in which we can share our innermost concerns, then we are able to share the burden and, together, to open ourselves up to the light of G-d which flows into us in a unique way each time we pray.

Before quoting from Leviticus, Luria’s first piece of advice flows from his reading of a set of stories from the Talmud. [5] In the context of the Talmud, the ancient rabbis were concerned about the inverse emotional challenge: should one pray from a state of lightheartedness, of excessive joy? In two parallel stories, two revered sages arrived for prayer in a jovial mood and their teachers called them out for disturbing the seriousness and presence-of-mind that sets the appropriate stage for prayer. Here, the Talmud transmits the psycho-spiritual insight that we should not allow our emotions to come to an extreme, even a positive extreme. Yet, the sages reassure their teachers by declaring “I am putting on *tefillin*!” What does putting on *tefillin* [6] have to do with behaving with lightheartedness? According to Rashi, wearing *tefillin* represents the solemn stance of accepting the burden of G-d’s Sovereignty, thereby grounding us in our responsibilities to perform *mitzvos* with a sense of seriousness and purpose. However, in the reading of the Ari z”l, it seems that wearing *tefillin* is a physical practice which can counteract gloom or depression. Wearing *tefillin* awakens us to the awesome privilege it is to do mitzvos, the sublime honor of serving God. So, between Rashi and the Ari, it seems that *tefillin* can serve as a tool to help us find balance between depression and frivolousness, between doomscrolling and toxic positivity.

In a sense, this is how I suggest we can wholeheartedly approach prayer in a moment like our own. *Tefillah* can be a practice of striving towards emotional and spiritual balance. When the reality of our current world weighs us down,

as it almost certainly will, then we can find grounding in the words of Torah we tie to our heads and hearts. If we recall this teaching of the Ari, we can remember that the purpose of prayer is to receive and to spread light and love, starting within our circles of dear ones with whom we pray and learn. Then, from a foundation of love, we can turn our attention with urgency and realism to the work we must do in the world at large, *l'yached shem yud-hey b'vav-hey b'shem kol yisroel* (to unify G-d's name, on behalf of all of us).



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REFLECTION

from Rabbi Jacob Chatinover

Asur la-adam le-hitpallel tefillato be-itzavon - "a person is forbidden to pray while in *itzavon*". What is this state that the Ari says is incompatible with prayer? We have translated it as "gloom," but let's unpack it further. To do so, I will draw on some insights I have gained in my own therapeutic journey exploring depression. My hope is that they will resonate with anyone who sometimes feels a gloom they cannot shake which blocks them from connecting with the Divine.

First, there is a gloom of despair. Every day we witness further motion away from God's vision of a redeemed world: a world of care, mutuality, integrity, and devotion.

TRANSLATION BY RABBIS MICAH FRIEDMAN AND JACOB CHATINOVER

It is forbidden for a person to pray in a state of gloom. If you do so, then your soul will be unable to receive the heavenly light that flows into you during prayer.

Surely, in the moment when you confess the vidui [7] and admit your specific mistakes, only then is it good to feel gloomy. But, in the rest of one's prayer, unbelievable damage is caused by gloom.

Rather, you need to demonstrate deep humility to the Blessed G-d, through awe and fear.

Surely, you should be as exceedingly joyous as possible.

Consider the image of a servant who serves their master with joy.

If they do their service with gloom, then their work will be repulsive before their master.

Almost the entire essence of realizing wholeness and attaining Divine inspiration depends on this, whether in the moment of prayer or when doing any other mitzvah.

It is like what is said in the Gemara (Berakhot 30b): when one sage was too giggly in prayer he justified himself saying "I am wearing tefillin."

Do not dismiss this matter because its effects are very great.

Before you lay out your prayer in synagogue, you need to accept upon yourself the mitzvah of "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) because through this love your prayer ascends in a way that includes all the prayers of every Jew, and you become able to grow upwards and yield fruit. [8]

Specifically, to embody the love between friends who engage in Torah together, each and every person needs to see themselves as if they are one limb of a collective body. And if you can, if you have the emotional and spiritual capacity (yedi`a ve-hasaga), you must know your friends intimately, and recognize each friend at the soul level.

Then, if one friend is going through a particularly difficult experience, everyone needs to share in that friend's suffering, whether it is about their health or their family (G-d forbid), and davven for it.

Similarly, whatever your prayers and needs and concerns, include your friends along with you.

My teacher, may his memory be a blessing, [9] constantly urged us to love the members of our fellowship.

[Visit our website to read the original hebrew](#)

A world of truth. And we are small, each of us trying not only to fix what is breaking, but also to care for our families, our loved ones, and ourselves. The psalmist encapsulates it: our lives are short, and most of our time is spent at work or dealing with some new problem;

days speed past and then fade to black (Ps. 90:10). Despair follows naturally.

Then, there is a gloom surrounding prayer itself. All of us are just trying to do our unique part to bring the world closer to how it deserves to be. What does prayer

even do? When we feel the urgency of the work to be done in the world, sometimes prayer can feel like a distraction. Or perhaps the weight of the work makes it difficult to summon the hope and faith to really pray.

All of these lead to the gloom of exhaustion. I don't know about you, but I feel constantly drained. No matter what I do, it never feels like enough. I don't feel like enough. After all, if I'm not solving the problem, I am the problem, right? There's nothing else to say about it, we're just tired.

This is the depression triad: helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness.

So what role can a prayer life play within this? Perhaps *tefillah* can help move some of what is blocked. We know that prayer isn't the same as action, but I'd like to suggest that it also isn't inaction. The Ari asks us to take prayer seriously as a core pillar of a life of Avodah ("service"), rather than an escape from it. That shift in perspective may allow us to perceive that "heavenly light that flows" when we begin to pray.

The Ari offers two alternatives to *itzavon*. First, "demonstrate deep humility to the Blessed G-d, through awe and fear." Awe: the recognition of our smallness, a drop in the Ocean; and fear: the desire for a future that we feel worthy of. Embracing these two can lead to humility. Yes, our lives are short and very busy. It never feels like enough, because it will never be enough. We won't solve it all, not alone and not in one lifetime, because we aren't meant to. [10] It is not despair, but humility, that leads me to say: you are not meant to heal the entire world. You can't. Put that burden off your shoulders. It is forbidden to pray while

carrying it.

And let us turn toward fear. Fear, sorrow, anger, emptiness: these are not blocks to our *avodah*, they are indications that we are already deeply committed to a life of *avodah*. As Joanna Macy and Molly Brown wrote: "Our sorrow is in equal measure love. We only mourn what we deeply care for ... In speaking fear, you also show the trust and courage it takes to speak it ... the anger we express has its source in our passion for justice ... emptiness is to be honored, too. To be empty allows space for the new to arise." [11] Your fear is not able to stop you from praying, because it is already a prayer.

Next, "be as exceedingly joyous as possible." There is a well-documented danger that texts like this one present. It is not a good idea to try to "turn off" your feelings. It's not healthy to shove them away, or deeper down. And it's not very effective! I'd like to suggest a slight tweak in how we read the Ari's charge. It isn't about deciding to be joyous and shunting away our gloom, so that we can then pray. It is about acknowledging what gloom does to us – how it freezes, drains, separates, and closes. And seeking, through prayer, to find an opening of the channel of supernal light. And through a life of prayer, to widen that opening.

As Brené Brown puts it, "you cannot selectively numb emotion": when we numb grief, shame, and fear, we also numb joy, gratitude, happiness. [12] So how are we to access a state "as exceedingly joyous as possible?" *Be-khol ha-efshar*: as much as possible. Given what is happening around you and within you, total bliss may not be possible. When you open up to pray, be honest about what is possible for you

in this moment. But we must acknowledge the inverse: in any moment of prayer, some light is possible. It is as false to deny light as it is to deny darkness. Do not dismiss it! Its effects are very great.

So, if we view *tefillah* as an oasis from the waves of *itzavon* that crash around us, new possibilities emerge:

When we feel helpless - how can prayer show us what we are capable of?

When we feel hopeless - how can prayer sharpen our vision of a better world?

When we feel worthless - how can prayer renew our sense of self?

What can prayer draw down into us that will renew our capacity to be of service? This moment is painful, and rightfully gloomy. When you pray in the context of this moment, you have a unique opportunity to express the needs of this moment. This was true in every fearful time in the past, and it will be true in every desperate time in the future.

Lastly, remember that you are not alone. You feel the pain of others because you seek connection with them. *Itzavon* wants us to isolate, and we cannot. By definition, it reveals our connection. Our sorrow is in equal measure love. Know your friends' pain, and *davven* as one limb of a body. Others are *davvening* for your needs too; and they are friends who know your soul. Know this.

As we share in pain with each other, let us pray, together, that despair never overtake us. That exhaustion remind us that no act is wasted. That our frustration be a refusal to accept the world as it is. That together, we can say to the gloom: "I reject your reality, and I substitute my own."

THIS TOO IS PRAYER: THINKING OF HESCHEL IN MINNEAPOLIS

Noa Baron

I feel the presence of the *Shechinah* (“Divine Presence”) most during protest.

And so when I learned of the national invitation to clergy (and clergy-in-training) to travel to Minneapolis and support communities on the ground, I eagerly leapt at the opportunity. Over 600 other clergy answered the call, gathering together in local churches for learning and action.

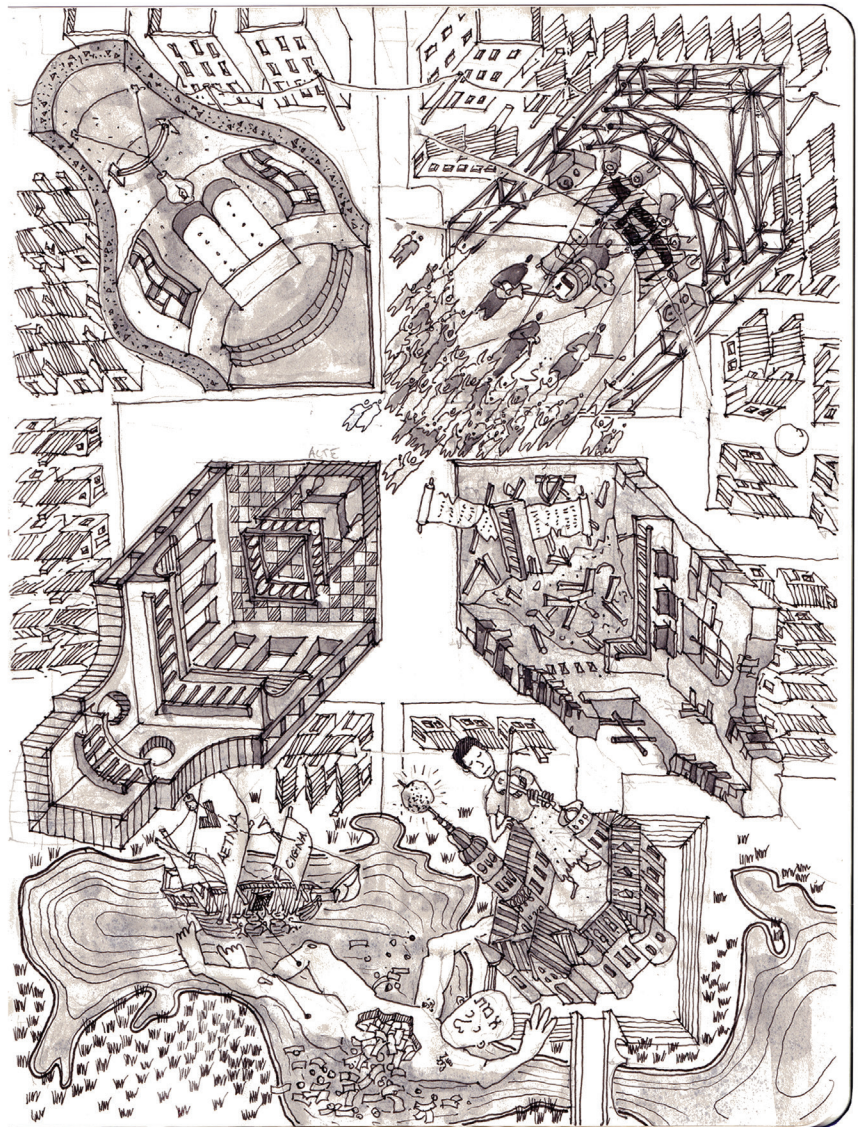
Susanah Heschel, a Jewish Studies scholar and the daughter of neo-Hasidic innovator [1] and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), publicly posted on Facebook days after the convening, saying “you are asking me where my father would be today: in Minneapolis with the other clergy. If you read his work and love his writing, you know he would never support the violence of this administration.” [2]

In December, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sent over 3,000 Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and DHS officers to Minnesota in what they deemed “Operation Metrosurge.” Between December and the end of February, 2026, federal officials arrested 4,000 people in Minnesota, including 5-year-old Liam Conjeno Ramos. [3] Agents terrorized Minneapolis communities; racially profiling people, deploying tear gas on non-violent protesters, and shooting three people, killing two of them, Renee Good and Alex Pret-

ti. [4] It was in solidarity with these targeted communities that the clergy gathering was organized: the flyer had read “Dr. King put out the call in Selma. We’re putting out the call in Minneapolis.” [5] One of the many who heeded the call in Selma in 1965 was Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Rabbi Heschel, who was a descendant of multiple Hasidic dynasties and originally raised to be a rebbe himself, taught at the Jewish Theology Seminary in N.Y.C. and is widely considered one of the most important 20th century Jewish thinkers. In his teaching

and writing, he stressed the importance of connecting to the Divine in the modern world and argued that both Hasidically-informed prayer and prophetically-informed activism were primary avenues for that connection. In *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Heschel says that “to pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.” [6] I felt like I was praying every second I was in Minneapolis.



Neisweiz, Belarus by Daniel Toretzky

The first moment I stepped into the large church hall filled with over 600 clergy from across the country, I felt goosebumps prickle up on my arms. The room was filled with a sense of pregnant anticipation, and it was almost too loud to hear myself think. Clergy filled every corner of the space as they ate vegetarian breakfast burritos, hugged new and old friends, and borrowed winter gear from the shared donation table. I could not help but be filled with an immense sense of wonder, much like how Heschel describes prayer. It felt like I could sense history happening right beneath my feet. Each moment felt like some sort of miracle — organizers had pulled together this clergy convening in just four days!

After marching from Selma to Montgomery with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to demand the passage of the Voting Rights Act, Heschel wrote “for many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.” [7] Reflecting on the march in his personal diary, Heschel compared marching with Dr. King to walking with the greatest Hasidic masters of his childhood. [8]

I discovered God the first time I got arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience. In college I participated in a protest advocating for updated federal voting rights legislation. After we were released, I remember feeling an electric feeling in my body, and a deep sense of what I can only describe as ecstatic relief, as if I had just cried or had a long laugh with a good friend.

This connection between pro-



test and prayer was palpable for Heschel. In fact, Heschel’s presentation of Hasidism in general has been described as one replete with “a brooding voice of discontent,” [9] positioning spirituality and morality as two sides of the same coin.

I love *davenen* (“praying”), but there is something more intense, more embodied, about the experience of putting my body on the line for all I believe to be true and good. While I aim to acutely tune into the present moment during both prayer and protest, I find it easier to accomplish through the latter. When I feel my actions are serving a higher purpose, my mind wanders less to my lunch plans, or the emails I need to send later. Only during protest do I feel so certain that I am in the right place, doing exactly what I should be doing at that moment.

But no matter how you feel about engaging in marches, rallies, or civil disobedience, I believe Minneapolis can serve as a teacher for us all, showing there is a role for everyone to play in resisting authoritarianism. [10]

In Minneapolis I saw so much beauty and so much pain.

Neighbors were caring for neighbors. People were arranging grocery and medication deliveries for others who can’t leave their homes

out of fear of ICE detention, organizing neighborhood watches, and dropping everything and sprinting towards the scene when they heard a whistle indicating ICE was nearby.

On January 23, 2026 over 50,000 people marched in -25 degree cold. Strangers passed out hand warmers to other marchers. One of my friends even said he was handed a warm potato on the march to use as a hand warmer.

While there were so many beautiful networks of resistance and community care, they didn’t obscure the simultaneous and palpable terror. Black and brown people, immigrants and non immigrants alike, continued to be snatched off the street. The morning after the clergy convening ended, Pretti was shot and murdered by Border Patrol agents. But even after that horrific scene unfolded, people continued to show up for one another. There were neighborhood vigils throughout the city.

In *The Prophets*, Heschel writes, “What the prophets proclaim is God’s intimate relatedness to man. It is this fact that puts all of life in a divine perspective, in which the rights of man become, as it were, divine prerogatives.” [11] Heschel describes the prophets as ‘activists’ of their time, people who loudly declared that God yearns for justice for all people. He understood that call to be echoed by the Hasidic masters, and believed that it is our actions that will make that a reality.

And like Heschel, I believe God deeply cares for humanity. I want to live in a world where we care for each other just as much. I still believe that that world is possible. May we build it together.

ONCE ONE HAS STARTED TO MENTION RAIN

Sharon Roseman

(After The Babylonian Talmud, Taanit, 5a)

Once one has started
to mention rain, hoping
for it to come
in the regular time,
once one has started
to mention rain,
one doesn't stop
until it comes.

But what if
you've been hoping
for rain
for weeks,
mentioning to anyone
who'll listen
to the obvious, tedious
worries of you and them
about another drought?

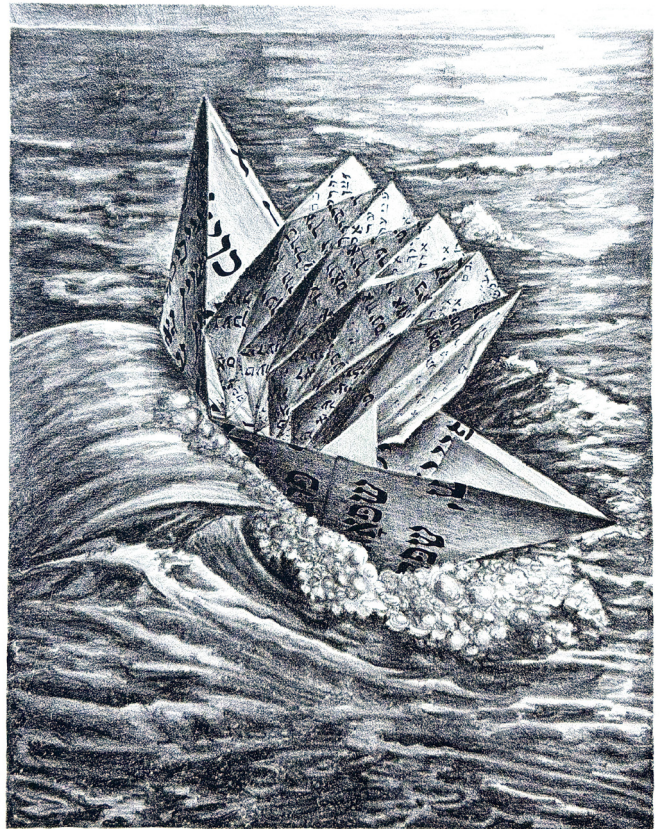
What if you've been asking
for rain for months,
yearning for it, praying for it,
dreaming about it with relief,
only to wake
to a tinder-dry palate
and cuts on the backs
of your fingers where you hefted
the cans of water
again and again?

What do you do after it starts
and goes and doesn't stop?
And mountainsides come
tumbling down and detours
aren't enough? And the rivers

rise, rise, rise, and rise again?
And seeping turns into rushes,
and rushes into lakes with island
houses and barns and trees
poking through the rising fear?

What do you do if you've been pleading
for days of sun to dry up all that rain?
What do you do after it bears down
and bears down and burns the grass,
the bushes, the trees, the spirits
of all those who'd hoped for crops
and shade to make a difference,
for summer days that turn into harvests,
and skies holding up horizons instead
of mushrooming clouds of smoke and ash?

Once one has started to mention
the burning weeping earth,
the relentlessness and greed
and old habits,
hoping for them to slow and turn and stop,
hoping for healing
to endure all that has been
and all that is to come,
once one has started to mention
the calamity that has been unleashed,
one doesn't stop.



Sturdier Than It Looks by Etai Rogers-Fett