

HOW DO YOU PRAY, RABBI?

A Sermon by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

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How Do You Pray?

Rabbi Schulweis' dialogue with "George" about the nature of prayer: Partnership with God is a reciprocal relationship. You cannot pray for anything without petitioning yourself.

What happens here in the sanctuary is not what happens in my study. The sanctuary is public domain – *reshut harabim*. Here is where I preside: I ask the questions, and I answer those I choose to answer. Here, in the sanctuary, I am protected by the shield of the pulpit — ten feet above contradiction.

But my study is a private domain — *reshut hayachid*. When George enters my study, there is nobody there but George and myself: No pulpit, no pew, no lectern, no microphone. We sit side by side in the study. And unlike the sanctuary, in the study no one has ever said to me, "Keep it short."

George is a congregant and a friend. He writes for T.V. comedy. He's witty, but George is a serious Jew. "You know, Rabbi," he begins, "I'm not one of those 'alimony Jews' — Jews willing to support the shul, but not willing to live with it."

"I know most people come to you for ritual rites, either to be hatched, matched or dispatched. But that's not why I've come. Rabbi, I haven't come to complain about the synagogue. I love Valley Beth Shalom, I love the synagogue, the cantor, the choir, the music, even the rabbi's sermon. But I must confess when I open the Machzor or the Siddur, I can't pray. Mind you, I can read the Hebrew. I can follow the cantor, I can clap and I can sing. I can read, but reading isn't praying, is it, Rabbi? I heard you quote the philosopher Santayana often: He said, 'Prayer is poetry believed in.' Well, I like prayers and poetry, but I can't believe. You have to believe in order to pray. Am I wrong, Rabbi? Can you petition a God who isn't there?! Can there be Godless prayer?"

"At services, I'm bored. And not because the worship is long. But, in truth, because I feel left out. The prayers have nothing to do with me.

"It's all about Him." (He points towards the ceiling.) "He is almighty, He is all-wise, He is all-powerful."

Then he starts to hum, "*He's Got the Whole World In His hands, He's got the whole wide world in His hands... He's got the itty-bitty baby in His hands, He's got the whole world in His hands.*"

"If he has the whole world in His hands, why doesn't the Almighty answer the cries of the "itty bitty babies" who are orphaned? Whose mothers are raped? Whose fathers are tortured? What of children born without limbs, or those eaten by ravaging diseases?"

George grew intense and drew his chair closer to mine. "Rabbi, don't get me wrong. I'm no village atheist. I want to pray, and I want to believe. I'm no 'amen-sayer.' I don't want only to be counted in the minyan like a cipher. I want to count. I don't want to feel irrelevant, like God's cipher, God's piece of dust. I want to believe what I pray and to whom I pray and for what. How do you pray, Rabbi, and to whom do you pray?"

George leaned back.

How do I answer George? I could, of course, talk to him about the joys of belonging, which I believe in. Belonging is the glue that keeps us together. But for George and lots of others, he wants more than adhesives; he wants substance. Belonging is not believing, and belonging is not enough. I could of course tell George to just behave — to put on tefillin, to keep kosher, to come to shul, to keep the Sabbath. But ritual practice is not believing, and George wants to believe.

"George," I said, "I think you hit the nail on the head. The crises of prayer is not esthetic, it's theological. Entertainment is no surrogate for belief. It's not a matter of a larger choir, or more musical instruments or even a shorter sermon. It's a matter of belief.

"Let's talk. Tell me, George, what kind of God don't you believe in?"

George replied, "Why are there different kinds of God? I thought Judaism believed in one God."

"God is one. But we are not. There are all kinds of Jewish perceptions of God: From Abraham to Abarbanel, from Moses to Moses Maimonides, from Spinoza to Soloveitchik. But one thing, George, I can assure you: Whatever Jewish idea of God you will discover, it won't be a God that leaves you out in the cold. It can't leave you feeling irrelevant. Nothing defeats prayer more than to feel superfluous. You can wrap yourself in a tallis and tefillin, but if you are not essential to prayer, you're just turning a prayer wheel, and you feel like a 'fifth wheel.' When you feel irrelevant, God is irrelevant.

"When I was young, George, I used to think of God as a kind of Superman: a disguised Clark Kent with thick glasses, a tallis cape and kippah, a celestial magician '*faster than a speeding bullet*' who can perform all kinds of miracles, rescue Lois Lane from disaster, saves vehicles from crashing. For me, God was Super Magic Man.

"We still have magical thinking about God, only today, magic is digitalized, George. Today, God — 'G-O-D' — is changed into a 'G-P-S' — Global Positioning System. Put your hands on the steering wheel: How you go, where you turn, which street, which freeway you take is revealed to you by an angelic, anonymous, invisible, authoritative, unarguable omniscient voice coming from somewhere above. If you should — G.P.S. forbid! — overshoot your mark, the voice will direct you to make a U-turn. You want glatt kosher, glatt treyf, pareve restaurant, the celestial voice will tell you how far you are from your destination. And who's the "*mashgiach*."

And that commanding voice is distinctly feminine! She's got the whole wide world in Her hands, and she tells you where to go... and tells you where to get off! Computerized, we grow passive, more dependent on super-human wizardry, looking skyward for intervention, direction. Our theology is technology. But as the internet gets smarter, we grow increasingly irrelevant. Somebody 'up there' is telling us where to go." We just follow orders.

George smiles, He's a comedy writer and thinks that is funny. Look for the skit

on *Saturday Night Live*. But I tell him that GPS is a metaphor for lazy religion, indolent faith. "Any God idea that turns the worshipper into a bystander rips the heart out of Jewish prayer. The 'GPS God' pushes God up and away, and isolates divinity from humanity. No wonder you're bored at prayer, George. Your theology is irrelevant because you have made yourself irrelevant. It's not God you don't believe. You don't believe in yourself. In no other world religion is the human being more relevant, more responsible, more elevated than in Judaism.

"Listen, George. Our sages in the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5), in the 2nd century, said, 'Every human being must think and act as if the whole world was made for him or her' — *'Beshvil'li nevra ha olam'* — For my sake was the world created.' This is not human conceit. This is the recognition of the godliness in your humanity. Human being is the language of God"

George says, "No one talked "God talk" around the home. How do I even begin to search for God?"

"Begin with yourself, George. After all, who is closer to God than yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just last week in the synagogue we read in Deuteronomy, *Parshat Nitzavim*...."

"I wasn't invited to the Bar Mitzvah."

(What a revealing argument. Who invites God to prayer?)

"The passage I refer to is a biblical response to the question, 'Where is God to be found? Where is the sacred mitzvah to be found?' The biblical answer is downright revolutionary. God, *t'shuvah*, the mitzvah in the Torah, are no mystery. The mitzvah is not found in the reading of the stars or by blind submission to an unfathomable voice. Listen to the Torah: 'It is not beyond your reach.'"

"It is not in the heavens that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us . . . neither is it beyond the sea that you should say who among us can cross to the other side and get it for us?" ' "

'It is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.' That means reverence for the Godliness in you and through you. "How do you begin to discover

God?" Start with your self! Without yourself, before you open the Siddur or Machzor. Begin understanding the God of Judaism before understanding yourself as Co-Creator, as God's ally on earth.

During Yizkor we read Psalm 8:5, 'What is man that you should be mindful of him?' It continues to describe man as finite, fragile, fallible. But then the passage in the Psalms concludes with an explosive Jewish response:

'But you have made him but little lower than God.' Mind you, in the Hebrew text, not lower than the angels, but lower than God. This is a bold statement, not found in any of the world traditions. You are created in God's image, which means you do not depend upon the death and resurrection of a supernatural savior for your salvation. No demonic force in you must be exorcised. And you don't have to shake before anybody's '*fatwa*.'

In Judaism, you pray, George, as a co-creator, co-responsible, co-partner with God. That vital belief is the astounding, unparalleled Jewish metaphor of our relationship with God:

"It tells as much about yourself as it tells about God. For a Jew, life is a partnership with God. In our faith, you are not born with original iniquity that damns the earth — you are created with original potentiality to sanctify the world.

George is growing impatient. "I thought, Rabbi, you had some theological, philosophical, logical argument for God's existence and goodness. Instead, you're talking to me about me. What I have I to do with God?"

"Everything. God can't be proven by philosophical argument, or by logic. The goodness and existence of God can be demonstrated only by human witness. You can either sanctify God or desecrate God's name on earth. You make the belief in God believable and loveable not by the smartness of your logic, but by the goodness of your behavior and the sincerity of your prayers. You are God's relevance and therein your relevance.

"When you, George, pray to God. It is you who are always included in the prayer.

"You can't pray to God for anything that does not involve you: e.g., pray for peace? Health? Safety? Love?

"You can't petition God without petitioning yourself.

"You can't pray, 'God give us peace' with your arms folded, your mouth sealed, your feet dragging.

"You can't pray, 'God, heal us,' and turn your head away from society's obligation to insure the blind, lame, sick, impoverished among us.

"You can't pray 'Lord, give us health' with a cigarette dangling from your lips.

"You can't pray, '*Ohev amo Yisroel*' — 'God loves His people Israel' and you not protest the ganging up on the Jewish people and the Jewish State.

"You cannot close your eyes while reciting '*Sh'ma Yisroel*' and remove your memory from the extermination of one-third of our people as if the trauma of Holocaust history is immaterial to your responsibility for the lives of our people and all God's people. You can't love your people in moral isolation. God has many partners of all races, creeds, nationalities, and all stem from Adam and Eve.

You can't pray to the God of creation and treat nature with callousness, allow its toxification, waste its growth.

You can't love God and then vilify, humiliate, exploit, intimidate the immigrant, the stranger, the unsuccessful, the sick, the broken.

"You can't pray 'Love the stranger in your midst' and not struggle against the wild xenophobia against the outsider. For we were outsiders in Egypt, in Poland, in England and Germany. You can't burn books which are sacred to others. We have had too many books burned in our lives which then fuelled our burning bodies. We know the fires of auto-da-fé and Kristallnacht that fed the flames of crematoria.

"Prayer is not pushing a piece of paper into the Wailing Wall. When you address God, you don't speak to a wall. That's "*Reden tzu der vant.*" You pray into your hands, into your arms, into your legs, into your eyes. You won't be bored. You come

alive!”

George interrupted me. “Rabbi, you mentioned the Holocaust. But you said nothing about God’s role in the Holocaust, His part in genocides, devastation of earthquakes in Haiti, oil spills and blood spills of greed and carelessness, Hurricane Katrina, ‘9-11’. Where was God?”

“George, I must confess. I am tired of turning God into the scapegoat for catastrophe. I reject the abuse of the term ‘It’s all God’s will,’ or ‘It’s an act of God,’ or it’s *“bashert.”*”

“Because that gives us an alibi excuse to break the contract of the divine-human partnership. That’s cheap piety. What you are really saying is, ‘Don’t count on me — count me out.’ You mean to shift the blame upwards. I could never say, ‘The Holocaust is God’s design, it’s His plan. It’s not me, Lord. What can I do?’”

“What can you do, George, what can I do? Respond! Not react, but respond. *T’shuvah* means ‘respond,’ and response is the verbal root from which responsibility is derived. In Hebrew the word for “responsibility” is *achrayoot*, which comes from the Hebrew *acher*, ‘the other.’ When you pray, open your eyes and your ears to the ‘other.’ To pray means to affirm that we are relevant and to confirm that we have the capacity, courage and conscience to respond.

“Speaking of ‘9-11,’ have you forgotten the divine human response that climbed up flights of fiery stairs to save burning people? In the wake of ‘9-11,’ when blood was so desperately needed, when hemorrhaging people needed witness to Godliness, a half a million human beings — not related to the victims — gave 125,000 gallons of blood to save lives of the ‘other.’ Human blood moved by the human heart to transfuse life into bleeding human beings.

“That’s authentic responsive prayer! In Haiti, Israel responded to the earthquake not by saying, ‘It must be God’s will,’ but by quickly sending equipment and nurses and medicine and physicians with speed and care and compassion. That’s partnership with God.

"Add two words to your petition: 'through me.' God help through me, God, my ally on earth, save "through me." God protect "through me." Erase "through me," you make yourself irrelevant, superfluous. If we wash our hands from this blood-soaked universe, we dissolve the covenanted partnership.

"The Jewish prophets called it 'lip piety.' If you just move your lips in prayer, you become a 'silent partner' and you make God deaf. In prayer you open the deafness of God by speaking into the ears of your people. '*Sh'ma Yisroel*' — Hear, Israel.

George interrupted me. "I know you have an appointment. On one foot, Rabbi, how do you pray? Where do you find God?"

"George, I pray in Hebrew from right to left, but I translate it from left to right. Let me explain. When the Hebrew reads that God above upholds the fallen, or heals the sick, frees these who are chained, it sounds to you and many that I have abdicated my Godliness to the G.P.S. voice. It sounds as if I myself have no part in sanctifying God's name and God's world.

"Where do I find God? How do I define God? How do I prove God? I find God in the suffixes, in the "i-n-g" gerunds of the verbs in Hebrew prayer. God is in your belief. God is in loving, healing, helping, comforting, consoling, feeling, freeing, protecting, protesting, wiping away the tears, soothing the pain, binding the wounds, straightening out the bent. Do you believe in that, George?"

"With all my heart. So, am I in your eyes an atheist?"

"George, you feel, you care, you give. So help me God, George, you're no atheist."

As George got up to leave the study, we shook hands. "You asked me how I pray, I remembered a Talmud dialogue when the rabbis asked 'Does God pray?' and they answered, 'Yes, God prays, for His is a house of prayer.' So, the rabbis continued, '*Mai matzli?*' God has everything, so what does he pray for, and to whom? The Talmud answers, 'This is God's prayer: *Yehi ratzon milfanai* — May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger so that I may deal with My children with mercy and stop short of the limit of strict judgment.' Think about it, George. In that rabbinic legend,

God prays to organize the Godliness within Him. God prays to master His self, to allow compassion to dominate relationships with others. I, too, pray to relate to my family, friends, and humanity so that the softness of my compassion overcomes the hardness of my judgment.”

For the sake of full disclosure, 'George' is not his real name. But he's here today. Look around.

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