

Prayer

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About a hundred years ago, Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter of Ger pondered over the question of what a certain shoemaker of his acquaintance should do about his morning prayer. His customers were poor men who owned only one pair of shoes. The shoemaker used to pick up their shoes at a late evening hour, work on them the whole night and part of the morning, in order to deliver them before their owners had to go to work. When should the shoemaker say his morning prayer? Should he pray quickly the first thing in the morning, and then go back to work? Or should he continue his work, let the appointed hour of prayer go by and, every once in a while, raising his hammer from the shoes, utter a sigh: “Woe unto me, I haven’t prayed yet!”? Perhaps that sigh is worth more than prayer itself.

We, too, face this dilemma of wholehearted regret or perfunctory fulfillment. Many of us regretfully refrain from habitual prayer, waiting for an urge that is complete, sudden, and unexampled. But the unexampled is scarce, and perpetual refraining can easily grow into a habit—idle, sullen, and stolid. We may even come to forget what to regret, what to miss.

I. PRAYER AS AN ANSWER

We do not refuse to pray. We merely feel that our tongue is tied, our mind inert, our inner vision dim, when we are about to enter the door that leads to prayer. We do not refuse to pray; we abstain from it. We ring the hollow bell of selfishness, rather than absorb the stillness that surrounds the world, that hovers over all the restlessness and fear of life—the secret stillness that precedes our birth and follows our death. Futile self-indulgence brings us out of tune with the gentle song of nature’s waiting, of mankind’s striving for salvation. Is not listening to the pulse of wonder worth silence and abstinence from self-assertion? Why do we not set apart an hour of living for devotion to God by surrendering to stillness? We dwell on the edge of mystery and ignore it, wasting our souls, risking our stake in God. We constantly pour our inner light away from Him, setting up the thick screen of self between Him and us, adding more shadows to the darkness that already hovers between Him and our wayward reason. Accepting surmises as dogmas, and prejudices as solutions, we ridicule the evidence of life for what is more than life. Our mind has ceased to be sensitive to the wonder. Deprived of the power of devotion to what is more important than our individual fate, steeped in passionate anxiety to survive, we lose sight of what fate is, of what living is. Rushing through the ecstasies of ambition, we only awake when plunged into dread or grief. In darkness, then, we grope for solace, for meaning, for prayer.

But there is a wider, voluntary entrance to prayer than sorrow and despair—the opening of our thoughts to God. We cannot make Him visible to us, but we can make ourselves visible to Him. So we open our thoughts to Him—feeble our tongue, but sensitive our heart. We see more than we can say. The trees stand like guards of the Everlasting; the flowers like signposts of His goodness—only we have failed to be testimonies to His presence, tokens of His trust. How could we have lived in the shadow of greatness and defied it?

Mindfulness of God rises slowly, a thought at a time. Suddenly we are there. Or is He here, at the margin of our soul? When we begin to feel a qualm of diffidence lest we hurt what is holy, lest we break what is whole, then we discover that He is not austere. He answers with love our trembling awe. Repentant of forgetting Him even for a while, we become sharers of gentle joy; we would like to dedicate ourselves forever to the unfoldment of His final order.

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.[1] It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. Who is worthy to be present at the constant unfolding of time? Amidst the meditation of mountains, the humility of flowers—wiser than all alphabets—clouds that die constantly for the sake of beauty, we are hating, hunting, hurting. Suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit greatness in nature. It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.

However, we often lack the strength to be grateful, the courage to answer, the ability to pray. To escape from the mean and penurious, from calculating and scheming, is at times the parching desire of man. Tired of discord, he longs to escape from his own mind—and for the peace of prayer. How good it is to wrap oneself in prayer, spinning a deep softness of gratitude to God around all thoughts, enveloping oneself in the silk of a song! But how can man draw songs out of his heart if his consciousness is a woeful turmoil of fear and ambition? He has nothing to offer but disgust, and the weariness of wasting the soul. Accustomed to winding strands of thoughts, to twisting phrases in order to reap praise, he is incapable of finding simple, straight words. His language abounds in traps and decoys, in shams and tricks, in gibes and sneers. In the teeth of such powerful distractions he has to focus all the powers of his mind on one concern. In the midst of universal agitation how can there be tranquillity?

Trembling in the realization that we are a blend of modesty and insolence, of self-denial and bias, we beseech God for rescue, for help in the control of our thoughts, words, and deeds. We lay all our forces before Him. Prayer is arrival at the border. “The dominion is Thine. Take away from me all that may not enter Thy realm.”

II. PRAYER AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself. Without the ideal, the real turns chaotic; without the universal, the individual becomes accidental. It is the pattern of the impeccable which makes the average possible. It is the attachment to what is spiritually superior: loyalty to a sacred person or idea, devotion to a noble friend or teacher, love for a people or for mankind, which holds our inner life together. But any ideal, human, social, or artistic, if it forms a roof over all of life, shuts us off from the light. Even the palm of one hand may bar the light of the entire sun. Indeed, we must be open to the remote in order to perceive the near. Unless we aspire to the utmost, we shrink to inferiority.

Prayer is our attachment to the utmost. Without God in sight, we are like the scattered rungs of a broken ladder. To pray is to become a ladder on which thoughts mount to God to join the movement toward Him which surges unnoticed throughout the entire universe. We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. God is

the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source, and we are the flowing of His force, the ebb and flow of His tides.

Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. For when we betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of the ego, we can behold a situation from the aspect of God. Prayer is a way to master what is inferior in us, to discern between the signal and the trivial, between the vital and the futile, by taking counsel with what we know about the will of God, by seeing our fate in proportion to God. Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say. For the accord of assertion and conviction, of thought and conscience, is the basis of all prayer.

Prayer teaches us what to aspire for. So often we do not know what to cling to. Prayer implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish. Salvation, purity of mind and tongue, or willingness to help, may hover as ideas before our mind, but the idea becomes a concern, something to long for, a goal to be reached, when we pray: "Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile; and in the face of those who curse me, let my soul be silent." [2]

Prayer is the essence of spiritual living. Its spell is present in every spiritual experience. Its drive enables us to delve into what is beneath our beliefs and desires, and to emerge with a renewed taste for the endless simplicity of the good. On the globe of the microcosm the flow of prayer is like the Gulf Stream, imparting warmth to all that is cold, melting all that is hard in our life. For even loyalties may freeze to indifference if detached from the stream which carries the strength to be loyal. How often does justice lapse into cruelty, and righteousness into hypocrisy. Prayer revives and keeps alive the rare greatness of some past experience in which things glowed with meaning and blessing. It remains important, even when we ignore it for a while, like a candlestick set aside for the day. Night will come, and we shall again gather round its tiny flame. Our affection for the trifles of living will be mixed with longing for the comfort of all men.

However, prayer is no panacea, no substitute for action. It is, rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness. It is in this light that we who grope, stumble, and climb discover where we stand, what surrounds us, and the course which we should choose. Prayer makes visible the right, and reveals the hampering and the false. In its radiance we behold the worth of our efforts, the range of our hopes, and the meaning of our deeds. Envy and fear, despair and resentment, anguish and grief, which lie heavily upon the heart, are dispelled like shadows by its light.

Sometimes prayer is more than a light before us; it is a light within us. Those who have once been resplendent with this light find little meaning in speculations about the efficacy of prayer. A story is told about a Rabbi who once entered heaven in a dream. He was permitted to approach the temple in Paradise where the great sages of the Talmud, the Tannaim, were spending their eternal lives. He saw that they were just sitting around tables studying the Talmud. The disappointed Rabbi wondered, "Is this all there is to Paradise?" But suddenly he heard a voice, "You are mistaken. The Tannaim are not in Paradise. Paradise is in the Tannaim."

III. SUFFERING—THE SOURCE OF PRAYER?

In those souls in which prayer is a rare flower, enchanting, surprising, and scarce, it seems to come to pass by the lucky chance of misfortune, as an inevitable or adventitious by-product of affliction. But suffering is not the source of prayer. A motive does not bring about an act as a cause produces an effect;

it merely stimulates the potential into becoming the actual. Peril or want may clear the ground for its growth, stubbing up the weeds of self-assurance, ridding the heart of the hard and obdurate, but it can never raise prayer.

To a farmer about to prepare a seedbed, the prerequisite for his undertaking is not the accidental need of a crop. His need of food does not endow him with skill in cultivating the earth; it merely affords the stimulus and purpose for his undertaking. It is his knowledge, his possession of the idea of tillage, which enables him to raise crops. The same principle applies to prayer. The natural loyalty of living, fertilized by faith saved through a lifetime, is the soil on which prayer can grow. Laden with secret fertility, and patient discreetness concerning things to be and things forever unknown, the soil of the soul nourishes and holds the roots of prayer. But the soil by itself does not produce crops. There must also be the idea of prayer to make the soul yield its amazing fruit.

The idea of prayer may seem to be the assumption of man's ability to accost God, to lay our hopes, sorrows, and wishes before Him. But this assumption is a paraphrase, rather than a precise expression of what we believe. We do not feel that we possess a magic power of speaking to the Infinite; we merely witness the wonder of prayer, the wonder of man addressing himself to the Eternal. Contact with Him is not our achievement. It is a gift, coming down to us from on high like a meteor, rather than rising up like a rocket. Before the words of prayer come to the lips, the mind must believe in God's willingness to draw near to us, and in our ability to clear the path for His approach. Such belief is the idea that leads us toward prayer.

Prayer is not a soliloquy. But is it a dialogue with God? Does man address Him as person to person? It is incorrect to describe prayer on the analogy of human conversation; we do not communicate with God. We only make ourselves communicable to Him. Prayer is an emanation of what is most precious in us toward Him, the outpouring of the heart before Him. It is not a relationship between person and person, between subject and subject, but an endeavor to become the object of His thought.

Prayer is like the light from a burning glass in which all the rays that emanate from the soul are gathered to a focus. There are hours when we are resplendent with the glowing awareness of our share in His secret interests on earth. We pray. We are carried forward to Him who is coming close to us. We endeavor to divine His will, not merely His command. Prayer is an answer to God: "Here am I. And this is the record of my days. Look into my heart, into my hopes and my regrets." We depart in shame and joy. Yet prayer never ends, for faith endows us with a bold craving that He draw near to us and approach us as a father—not only as a ruler, not only through our walking in His ways, but through His entering into our ways. The purpose of prayer is to be brought to His attention, to be listened to, to be understood by Him; not to know Him, but to be known to Him. To pray is to behold life not only as a result of His power, but as a concern of His will, or to strive to make it a divine concern. For the ultimate aspiration of man is not to be a master, but an object of His knowledge. To live "in the light of His countenance,"[3] to become a thought of God—this is the true career of man.

But are we worthy of being known, of entering into His mercy, of being a matter of concern to Him? It seems as if the meaning of prayer lies in man's aspiration to be thought of by God as one who is thinking of Him. Man waxes in God when serving the sacred, and wanes when he betrays his task. Man lives in His mind when He abides in human life.

There is no human misery more strongly felt than the state of being forsaken by God. Nothing is so terrible as rejection by Him. It is a horror to live deserted by God, and effaced from His mind. The fear of being forgotten even for an instant is a powerful spur to a pious man to bring himself to the attention of

God, to keep his life worth being known to Him. He prefers to be smitten by His punishment rather than to be left alone. In all his prayers he begs, explicitly or implicitly, "Do not forsake me, O Lord." [4]

The man who betrays Him day after day, drunk with vanity, resentment, or reckless ambition, lives in a ghostly mist of misgivings. Having ruined love with greed, he is still wondering about the lack of tenderness. His soul contains a hiding-place for an escaping conscience. He has torn his ties to God into shreds of shrieking dread, and his ear is dull and callous. Spoiler of his own lot, he walks the earth a skeleton of a soul, raving about missed delight.

God is not alone when discarded by man. But man is alone. To avoid prayer constantly is to dig a gap between man and God which can widen into an abyss. But sometimes, awakening on the edge of despair to weep, and arising from forgetfulness, we feel how yearning moves in softly to become the lord of a restless breast, and we pass over the gap with the lightness of a dream.

IV. THE NATURE OF KAVVANAH

A Rabbi once remarked on the passage in the Amidah, "For Thou hearkenest in mercy to the prayer of every mouth," that we would expect the phrase to be "the prayer of every heart." But the passage wishes to remind us that it is the mercy of God to accept even prayers that come only from the mouth as lip-service, without inner devotion. However, this remark in no way denies the principle that Kavvanah, or inner participation, is indispensable to prayer, the principle which found a precise expression in the medieval saying: "Prayer without Kavvanah is like a body without a soul."

Yet, what is the nature of Kavvanah? Is it paying attention to the context of the fixed texts? Thinking? Prayer is not thinking. To the thinker, God is an object; to the man who prays, He is the subject. Awaking in the presence of God, our aim is not to acquire objective knowledge, but to deepen the mutual allegiance of man and God. What we want is not to know Him, but to be known to Him; not to form judgments about Him, but to be judged by Him; not to make the world an object of our mind, but to let it come to His attention, to augment His, rather than our knowledge. We endeavor to disclose ourselves to the Sustainer of all, rather than to enclose the world in ourselves.

To most people, thinking is a thing that grows in the hothouse of logic, separated from the atmosphere of character and of everyday living. They consider it possible for a man to be unscrupulous, and yet to write well about righteousness. Others may disagree with this view. However, all of us, mindful of the ancient distinction between lip-service and the service of the heart, agree that prayer is not a hothouse plant of temples, but a shoot that grows in the soil of life, springing from widespread roots hidden in all our needs and deeds. Vicious needs, wicked deeds, felt or committed today, are like rot cankering the roots of tomorrow's prayer. A hand used in crime is an axe laid to the roots of worship. It is as Isaiah said: "And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; Your hands are full of blood." [5] Life is fashioned by prayer, and prayer is the quintessence of life.

The laws of science we comprehend as a rational concept in critical understanding, while the mercy and greatness of the Infinite we absorb as a mystery. Prayer is a spiritual source in itself. Though not born of an urge to learn, it often endows us with insights not attainable by speculation. It is in prayer that we obtain the subsidy of God for the failing efforts of our wisdom.

But prayer goes beyond the scope of emotion; it is the approach of the human to the transcendent. Prayer makes man a relative to the sublime, initiating him into the mystery. The will, at times, is an outsider to the sanctuary of the soul. It ushers in great things, but does not always control them. The will

to pray opens the gates, but what enters is not its product. The will is not a creative, but an auxiliary power, the servant of the soul. Creative forces may be discharged, but not engendered, by the will. Thus, inclination to pray is not prayer. Deeper forces and qualities of the soul must be mobilized before prayer can be accomplished. To pray is to pull oneself together, to pour our perception, volition, memory, thought, hope, feeling, dreams, all that is moving in us, into one tone. Not the words we utter, the service of the lips, but the way in which it is performed, the devotion of the heart to what the words contain, the consciousness of speaking under His eyes, is the pith of prayer.

For neither the lips nor the brain are the limits of the scene on which prayer takes place. Speech and devotion are functions auxiliary to a metaphysical process. Common to all men who pray is the certainty that prayer is an act which makes the heart audible to God. Who would pour his most precious hopes into a deaf abyss? Essential is the metaphysical rather than the psychical dimension of prayer. Prayer is not a thought that rambles alone in the world, but an event that starts in man and ends in God. What goes on in our heart is a humble preliminary to an event in God.

The passage of hours, almost unnoticeable, but leaving behind the feeling of loss or omission, is either an invitation to despair or a ladder to eternity. This little time in our hands melts away ere it can be formed. Before our eyes man and maid, spring and splendor, slide into oblivion. However, there are hours that perish and hours that join the everlasting. Prayer is a crucible in which time is cast in the likeness of the eternal. Man hands over his time to God in the secrecy of single words. When anointed by prayer, his thoughts and deeds do not sink into nothingness, but merge into the endless knowledge of an all-embracing God. We yield our thoughts to Him who endowed us with a chain of days for the duration of life.

V. THE ESSENCE OF PRAYER

To many psychologists, prayer is but a function, a shadow cast by the circumstances of our lives, growing and diminishing along with our needs and wants. Consequently, to understand the nature of prayer, it is enough to become familiar with the various occasions on which it is offered. But is it possible to determine the value of a work of art by discovering the occasion of its creation? Assuming that we can ascertain whether Cervantes wrote his Don Quixote in order to pay his debts, or to attain fame and impress his friends, would that have any bearing upon either the intrinsic value, or our appreciation of his art? Nor is the factor which induces a person to pray the substance of prayer. The essence of prayer is inherent in the act of prayer itself. It can be detected only inside the consciousness of man during the act of worship.

The drive toward practical consequences is not the force that inspires a person at the moment of his chanting praise to God. Even in supplication the thought of aid or protection does not constitute the inner act of prayer. The hope of results may be the motive that leads the mind into prayer, but not the content which fills the worshiper's consciousness in the essential moment of prayer. The artist may give a concert for the sake of the promised remuneration, but, in the moment when he is passionately seeking with his fingertips the vast swarm of swift and secret sounds, the consideration of subsequent reward is far from his mind. His whole being is immersed in the music. The slightest shift of attention, the emergence of any ulterior motive, would break his intense concentration, and his singleminded devotion would collapse, his control of the instrument would fail. Even an artisan can never be true to his task, unless he is motivated by love of the work for its own sake. Only by wholehearted devotion to his trade, can he produce a consummate piece of craftsmanship. Prayer, too, is primarily Kavvanah, the yielding of the entire being to one goal, the gathering of the soul into focus.

The focus of prayer is not the self. A man may spend hours meditating about himself, or be stirred by the deepest sympathy for his fellow man, and no prayer will come to pass. Prayer comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the act of prayer. Feeling becomes prayer in the moment in which we forget ourselves and become aware of God. When we analyze the consciousness of a supplicant, we discover that it is not concentrated upon his own interests, but on something beyond the self. The thought of personal need is absent, and the thought of divine grace alone is present in his mind. Thus, in beseeching Him for bread, there is one instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger nor to food, but to His mercy. This instant is prayer.

We start with a personal concern and live to feel the utmost, for the fate of the individual is a counterpoint in a larger theme. In prayer we come close to hearing the eternal theme and discerning our place in it. It is as if our life were a seamless garment, continuous with the Infinite. Our poverty is His. His property is ours. Overwhelmed with awe of His share in our lives, we extend ourselves to Him, expose our goals to His goodness, exchange our will for His wisdom. For this reason, the analogy between prayer and petitioning another human being is like the analogy between the ocean and a cup of water. For the essence of prayer lies in man's self-transcending, in his surpassing the limits of what is human, in his relating the natural to the Divine.

Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives, to let His will prevail in our affairs; it is the opening of a window to Him in our will, an effort to make Him the Lord of our soul. We submit our interests to His concern, and seek to be allied with what is ultimately right. Our approach to the Holy is not an intrusion, but an answer. Between the dawn of childhood and the door of death, man encounters things and events out of which comes a whisper of truth, not much louder than stillness, but exhorting and persistent. Yet man listens to his fears and his whims, rather than to the soft petitions of God. The Lord of the universe is suing for the favor of man, but man fails to realize his own importance. It is the disentanglement of our heart from cant, bias, and ambition, the staving in of the bulk of stupid conceit, the cracking of hollow self-reliance, that enables us to respond to this request for our service.

VI. THE TWO MAIN TYPES OF PRAYER

At first sight prayer appears to be a communication of ideas or feelings through spoken words. Every one of us bears a vast accumulation of unuttered sorrows, scruples, hopes, and yearnings, frozen in the muteness of his nature. In prayer the ice breaks, our feelings begin to move our mind, striving for an outlet. It is not an expression of things accidentally stored up in our minds, but an emanation of what is most personal in us, an act of self-expression.

Yet, in a sense, prayer starts where expression fails. The words that reach our lips are often but waves of an overflowing stream touching the shore. We often seek and miss, struggle and fail to adjust our unique feelings to the patterns of texts. The soul, then, intimates its persistent striving, the riddle of its unhappiness, the strain of living twixt hope and fear. Where is the tree that can utter fully the silent passion of the soil? Words can only open the door, and we can only weep on the threshold of our incommunicable thirst after the incomprehensible. A certain passage in the morning prayer was interpreted by the Kotzker Rabbi to mean that God loves what is left over at the bottom of the heart and cannot be expressed in words. It is the ineffable feeling which reaches God rather than the expressed feeling.

Various attempts have been made to classify prayer. The division into supplication and praise pays attention to the theme, but not to the inner dynamics of prayer. This inner dynamics takes its course between the soul of man and the words. From this point of view, we have to distinguish between two main types of prayer: prayer as an act of expression, and prayer as an act of empathy. The first type takes place when there is a strong feeling within that leads to prayer, when we are stirred by something and seek words to express our state of mind. But the more common type of prayer is an act of empathy. There need be no prayerful mood in us when we begin to pray. It is through our reading and feeling the words of the prayers, through imaginative projection of our consciousness into the meaning of the words, and through empathy into the ideas with which the words are pregnant, that this type of prayer comes to pass.

The ability to express what is hidden in the heart is a rare gift, and cannot be counted upon by all men. What, then, makes it possible for us to pray is our ability to affiliate our own minds with the pattern of fixed texts, to unlock our hearts to the words, and to surrender to their meanings. For words are not dead tools, but living entities full of spiritual power. The power of words often surpasses the power of our minds. The word is often the giver, and man the recipient. Thus man submits to the words. They inspire his mind and awaken his heart. We do not turn the light of prayer on and off at will, as we control sober speculation; we are seized by the overwhelming spell of His name. It is amazement, not understanding; awe, not reasoning; a challenge, a sweep of emotion, the tide of a mood, an identification of our wills with the living will of God.

What do most of us know about the substance of words? Estranged from the soil of the soul, our words do not grow as fruits of joy, but are found as sapless clichés, refuse in the backyard of the intelligence. There can be no prayer without a sense of the dignity of words. Everyone feels the binding force of the uttered word, the reality of an oath, vow, or promise, but rarely do we ponder on the nature of the secret power stored up in words. When the heart, co-operating with the forces of faith against tumult and anxiety, succeeds in keeping alive the inner stillness, we feel how great and gentle words can be. Strength and pride come from their sounds. They soften the harshness of fear and unfold the wings of hope. Our thoughts, tiny and feeble, become powerful in their wake.

There is always the opportunity of realizing the holy, but when we fail to use it, there are words to remind the mind what to draw from the depth of every hour. Words are like mountain peaks pointing to the unfathomable. Ascending their trails we arrive at prayer. They are like notes of music. It is the strength of our inner life which makes the symbols live; it is the fulness of our heart which lends force to words. By our feeling we make manifest and real what is indicated in the texts. In prayer, we discover what moves us unawares, what is urgent in our lives, what in us is related to the ultimate.

Is it the outburst of eloquence which makes the Infinite listen to our feeble voice? Prayer is not a sermon delivered to God. Essential in prayer is the intention, not the technical skill. In oratory, as in any other work of art, we endeavor to lend an adequate form to an idea; we apply all our care to adjusting the form to the content. But prayer is almost pure content; the form is unimportant. It makes no difference whether we stammer or are eloquent. We can concentrate entirely on our inner devotion.

Two brief stories may be told relative to the two main types of prayer, the expressive and the empathic. One of these, told in Sefer Hassidim, concerns a young shepherd who was unable to read the Hebrew prayers. The only way in which he worshiped God was to say: "O Lord, I should like to pray, but I cannot read Hebrew. There is only one thing I can do for you—if you would give me your sheep, I would take care of them for nothing." One day a learned man passing by heard the shepherd pronounce his offer, and shouted at him: "You are blasphemous!" He told the boy that he should read the daily Hebrew

prayers instead of uttering irreverent words. When the shepherd told him that he could not read Hebrew, he took him to his house and began to teach him to read the prayer-book. One night the learned man had a dream, in which he was told that there was great sadness in heaven because the young shepherd had ceased to say his usual prayer. He was commanded to advise the boy to return to his old way of praying.

Now many of us are so much on the side of the shepherd-boy as to be opposed to the institution of regular prayer, claiming that we should pray only when and as we feel inspired to do so. For such there is a story, told by Rabbi Israel Friedman, the Rzhiner, about a small Jewish town, far off from the main roads of the land. But it had all the necessary municipal institutions: a bathhouse, a cemetery, a hospital, and a law-court; as well as all sorts of craftsmen—tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, and masons. One trade, however, was lacking; there was no watchmaker. In the course of years many of the clocks became so annoyingly inaccurate that their owners just decided to let them run down, and ignore them altogether. There were others, however, who maintained that as long as the clocks ran they should not be abandoned. So they wound their clocks day after day, though they knew that they were not accurate. One day the news spread through the town that a watchmaker had arrived, and everyone rushed to him with their clocks. But the only ones he could repair were those that had been kept running—the abandoned clocks had grown too rusty!

VII. THE VISION OF PRAYER

The thirst for companionship, which drives us so often into error and adventure, indicates the intense loneliness from which we suffer. We are alone even with our friends. The smattering of understanding which a human being has to offer is not enough to satisfy our need of sympathy. Human eyes can see the foam, but not the seething at the bottom. In the hour of greatest agony we are alone. It is such a sense of solitude which prompts the heart to seek the companionship of God. He alone can know the motives of our actions; He alone can be truly trusted. Prayer is confidence, unbosoming oneself to God. For man is incapable of being alone. His incurable, inconsolable loneliness forces him to look for things yet unattained, for people yet unknown. He often runs after a sop, but soon retires discontented from all false or feeble companionship. Prayer may follow such retirement.

What is pride worth if it does not add to the glory of God? We forfeit our dignity when we abandon loyalty to what is sacred; our existence dwindles to trifles. We barter life for oblivion, and pay the price of toil and pain in the pursuit of aimlessness. Only concern for our inalienable share in the unknown holds our inner life together. It enables us to grasp the utopia of faith, to divine what is desirable to God, aspiring to be, not only a part of nature, but a partner of God. The sacred is a necessity in our lives, and prayer is born of this necessity. Through prayer we sanctify ourselves, our feelings, our ideas. Everyday things become sacred when prayed for to God.

The privilege of praying is man's greatest distinction. For what is there in man to induce reverence, to make his life sacred and his rights inalienable? The possession of knowledge, wealth, or skill does not compose the dignity of man. A person possessing none of these gifts may still lay claim to dignity. Our reverence for man is aroused by something in him beyond his own and our reach, something that no one can deprive him of. It is his right to pray, his ability to worship, to utter the cry that can reach God: "If they cry at all unto Me, I will surely hear their cry." [6]

The main ends of prayer are to move God, to let Him participate in our lives, and to interest ourselves in Him. What is the meaning of praise if not to make His concern our own? Worship is an act of inner agreement with God. We can only petition Him for things we need when we are sure of His sympathy for

us. To praise is to feel God's concern; to petition is to let Him feel our concern. In prayer we establish a living contact with God, between our concern and His will, between despair and promise, want and abundance. We affirm our adherence by invoking His love.

Prayer is spiritual ecstasy. It is as if all our vital thoughts in fierce ardor should burst the mind to stream toward God. A keen single force draws our yearning for the utmost out of the seclusion of the soul. We try to see our visions in His light, to feel our life as His affair. We begin by letting the thought of Him engage our minds, by realizing His name and entering into a reverie which leads through beauty and stillness, from feeling to thought, and from understanding to devotion. For the coins of prayer bear the image of God's dreams and wishes for fear-haunted man.

At the beginning of all action is an inner vision in which things to be are experienced as real. Prayer, too, is frequently an inner vision, an intense dreaming for God—the reflection of the Divine intentions in the soul of man. We dream of a time “when the world will be perfected under the Kingdom of God, and all the children of flesh will call upon Thy name, when Thou wilt turn unto Thyself all the wicked of the earth.”[7] We anticipate the fulfillment of the hope shared by both God and man. To pray is to dream in league with God, to envision His holy visions.