

## Prayer is a Complicated Thing

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2013 / 5774

Rabbi Esther Adler

---

So a congregant comes to the rabbi and complains that the service is too long. Another one comes and complains that the service is too short.

No, it isn't the beginning of one of those a "rabbi, a minister, and a priest" jokes – it's actually the beginning of a Second century midrash in the name of Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus.

To the first one, who complains that the service is too long, Rabbi Eliezer answers, "you think that was long – Moses prayed non-stop for forty days and nights when he went up on Mount Sinai..." and to the second one, who complained that the service was too short, he says, "You think that was short? Moses's prayer for Miriam's healing was only 5 words.

If anyone should know how to pray, Moses should. But prayer is a complicated thing. Recently, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the new president of the Union for Reform Judaism visited the Twin Cities. In a breakfast session with reform clergy, educators, and Executive Directors Rabbi Jacobs asked us to share some of the joys and challenges of our work. One rabbi said that his biggest challenge was that he felt that services at his synagogue were "vacuous." How sad. When my turn came, I was proud to say that I did certainly did not feel that way about *our* services.

We are going to spend many hours together in prayer over the next few weeks. I hope – and pray – that nobody here will leave feeling the experience to have been vacuous, and assure you that we will work very hard to make it meaningful.

What does it take for prayer to really work? In Rabbi Eliezer's midrash, Moses is held up as the model of one who *really* knows how to pray. But he wasn't born that way; he learned over time.

Shortly after our ancestors left Egypt, Moses stood with his people on the shore of the Red Sea, caught between the rapidly approaching Egyptian army and the seemingly impassable waters. Moses, as you would expect, turned to God in

prayer. But instead of answering Moses' prayer, God rebuffed him, saying, "Why are you crying out to *me*?" (Exodus 14:15)

What a strange thing for God to say! Who else should Moses cry out to? And certainly God already knew *why* Moses was praying. It was obvious. Our people were trapped and they needed God's help. So why did God take Moses to task for praying at that moment, when prayers seemed so desperately needed? It seems God thought Moses was *whining*, not praying.

Rabbi Eliezer says that God is not questioning Moses's impulse to pray here, but rather the **nature** of his prayer. According to Rabbi Eliezer, God said to Moses, "My children are in trouble - the sea shuts them off on one side, and the enemy pursues them on the other - and yet you stand and make long prayers. Don't you know that there is a time to make long prayers and a time to make short ones? Tell the Israelites to go forward." (Ex. 14:15 and Mekilta on Parashat Beshalach 3)

In other words, God is instructing Moses to stop praying *so much* and to get *moving*. The ancient rabbi teaches us that the faithful response in time of need is not just to turn to God in lengthy prayer, but to trust *your abiding relationship* with God and take appropriate action.

For Moses and the Israelites, caught between an army and a wet place the appropriate thing was not just to express *words of faith*, but to take a *literal leap of faith* – into the sea. Moses needed to remember all the miracles God performed during the Exodus and trust that the One who had so recently performed such great wonders on the Israelites' behalf would not let them drown in the sea or be annihilated on the shore.

Finally, after being scolded but trusting in God, Moses did act. He lifted his staff over the sea. The waters parted and our people crossed over safely.

Moses enjoyed lengthy prayers; long one-on-one's with God, but this incident taught him how and when to offer prayers that were short and to the point so that he could begin moving forward.

So later, in the book of Numbers, we see Moses a few years older and wiser, facing crisis again. This time he takes a different approach in his prayer, drawing upon what he learned at the Red Sea. In chapter 12 of the book of Numbers, Miriam gets leprosy. In desperation Moses cries out to God, but this time, with only 5 short words: *"El Na, r'fa Na la.* "Please God, please heal her!" (Numbers 12:13 and Sifre Numbers Beha'aloteha 195).

Moses shows us that both long and short prayers have their proper place in our spiritual lives. Long prayers are part of a spiritual practice that can help us gain deep and abiding wisdom and insight. Short prayers, on the other hand, can help us draw on our spiritual reserves in times of need and stress, while recognizing the need to act. Each has its place, and Moses' prayer life reflects the value of both.

For most of us, the lengthy prayers that can foster spiritual growth take place here in the sanctuary, on the Holy Days and Shabbat when we gather for a couple of hours at a time to worship God and hear words of Torah. These are moments when we can take time to reflect on, *and build* our own personal relationships with God. This relationship-building is also faith building. But it's important to remember that like all relationships, building a relationship with God is a slow, and not necessarily linear process. Spiritual growth is a long and winding journey and even though we can't see the gradual unfolding of our spirit each time we attend and participate in services, we need to trust that it is there.

Perhaps, like Rabbi Eliezer's students, we can take comfort in the knowledge that even Moses didn't always get it.

But, as we learn from Moses's experience with Miriam's illness, there are times when we feel a spontaneous or urgent need to pray. These might be times of joy and awe, but more often are times of stress and challenge, or when like the Israelites we feel trapped by the circumstances of life. These times, as Moses discovered on the shore of Red Sea, are not occasions for lengthy prayers asking God to fix the problem. At these moments, we do not have the luxury of spending forty days and nights on the mountain top in spiritual pilgrimage. These are the occasions in which our prayers help us draw upon the spiritual resources we have built over time - and which, as I said, give us the courage to act, or at least start moving.

If we have done the work of spirit-building in advance; if we have taken the time and effort to build our relationship with God, to fill our spiritual reservoirs through prayer and reflection in the synagogue, then when faced with overwhelming personal challenges, we can pray briefly and directly for what we need, as Moses did when confronted by his sister's disease. We can pray for courage or strength, insight or hope, and the love and support of family and friends. We can pray for the ability to draw upon the life-enhancing, life-affirming gifts we have already received so that we can make the decisions we need to make and do what needs to be done.

And then, when life returns to a calmer state, when peace returns to our lives, the journey can continue – taking advantage of our opportunities for longer prayer to reflect on our challenges in our continuing spiritual journeys, to refill our spiritual reservoirs.

The Rebbe of Tzanz was asked by one of his disciples: What does the Rabbi do before praying? I pray, the Rebbe answered, that I may be able to pray properly.

Tonight we begin a journey of prayer together. May it be filled with meaning for us all, may it strengthen our personal relationships with God, and move our spirits, so that when it comes time to move our feet, we have the reserves of strength to move forward and do what we need to do.

*Y'hiyu l'ratzon imrei phi, vhegyon libi l'fanecha*, May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable before you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.