Prayer as Practice
Based on a teaching by Ebn Leader
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The late-night host asked comedian Paul Rudd, "Are you a practicing Jew?' Rudd took a beat and with a sly smile answered, "No I have perfected it"

Saying that something is a spiritual practice, like Judaism or prayer more specifically implies a few things. First of all it implies that there is a clear goal that you are aspiring towards and that the practice will advance you towards that goal. That is why we practice; we practice something in order to be able to reach a particular goal. In light of that goal you can evaluate how useful the practice has been. Has it been successful in moving you towards the goal or has it not been successful in moving ahead towards the goal?

My understanding of tefila is rather similar to that. After engaging in tefila I ask myself: in what way have I gotten

better at it and in what way is my getting better at it actually reflected in the way I live my life?

I realize that for some people it is very difficult to imagine articulating specific goals for tefila. However I really believe that if it is going to take you somewhere, you need to have a sense of where it is going to take you, and what you are going to do with that.

There can be all sorts of goals for tefila.

On a very basic level, tefila can be a practice for an individual or for a community.

The Talmud offers 2 paradigms for tefila - *tefilot avot tiknum* and *tefilot kineged korbanot tiknum*. The tefilot are established to parallel the patriarchs or the tefilot are established to parallel the temple sacrifices.

One of the big differences between these two paradigms is that the temple paradigm is a communal paradigm. No individual brings *korban tamid*, the regular sacrifice. No individual has an obligation, a *hiyuv* to bring the daily sacrifice. It is an action of the entire community. Take that paradigm to its logical end, and you understand that tefila is a communal activity. Using the temple as a paradigm for tefila means that tefila is a communal practice, not a practice focused on the individual.

Ebn Leader, a teacher I had on this topic explained it to me this way: watch what a person does when they come in late to services. Imagine a person walks in late and finds the cantor halfway through the service. Services started at 8:30, the person walks in at 9:15. What does the person do?

There are two ways of responding to that situation. One person, probably the vast majority of cases in North American synagogues, and here at Temple Sholom is going to walk in, sit down, look at the person next to them, ask

"what page are we on," open to that page, and join the community. That is a statement about what tefila is.

Another person will come in, and say "Oh, the Cantor is are already here, wait a minute, I have these other things I have to do until I can catch up. That is a different statement about tefila.

Is the primary aspect of tefila the communal aspect and the individuals participating in it are necessary because without them there is no community, or is it the other way around? Is the primary practice of tefila an individual practice, (which is the paradigm of *avot*) and the usefulness of having a community pray is that the community creates a supportive context for individuals to do their practice? Like going to a gym but working out individually.

Those are 2 very different ways of thinking about what tefila is.

Look for instance at the way communal prayer developed in the Reform movement in this country. It is pretty clear that tefila was a communal activity. One of its central characteristics was proclaiming and creating a sense of identity, of the values that we, as a community believe in. That is why *kriyat shema* became the central piece of our services as opposed to the *amidah*, that is why throughout my childhood *kriyat shema* was said standing up, that is why some synagogues revived the practice of including the ten commandments in the liturgy (an ancient practice, going back to temple times). Of course there are many elements involved in forming a service, but part of it in this case is the sense that tefila is about creating our communal identity and being able to say what it is that we believe in.

What does it say about the communal nature of prayer that some synagogues, even reform synagogues have moved toward the Amidah, the more individual portion of the service as the central focus, of that these two are in tension with each other It gets muddied a bit because we pray more

regularly on shabbat and the tfialh on Shabbat is largely prayers of praise which can be viewed as communal or individual but in week day minyanim the difference is clear. Shema is communal, Amidah is individual time with God.

In a different Jewish world they will tell you that the goal of tefila is to bring about changes in the world. If it doesn't rain and you want it to rain, that's a goal for tefila. The community prays, tears its clothes, puts sack on its body, ashes on its head and tries to bring rain through tefila.

In many communities today, like ours there is a social dynamic value to tefila. Tefila creates community, creates a sense of togetherness, creates a sense that we are all here for each other, we are joined, this is a place where people are welcome to come in and be part of a Jewish community.

You could also have a totally individual goal for tefila. You could say that tefila is about having a mystical experience of seeing God. The goal of tefila is my internal

experience. This does not necessarily negate praying as a community. It is possible that having another thirty people around me who make sure that I do it every day, and add their voices to the service helps me achieve that goal. Again like going to the gym instead of having to remove the clothes hanging on your peloton or treadmill at home to get a work out in.

Maybe a goal for tefila is to fulfill an obligation, a *hiyuv*. I feel that I am under an obligation to say certain words at a certain time of the day, and I am going to say them. Probably not a feeling many in this room share but one that has a growing appeal amongst fundamentalists in the broader Jewish community.

In the most extreme form of this idea, Leibovitz (translating a Calvinist idea into the Jewish idiom) would say that this is all about creating the one authentic religious experience, which is that of submission. I cultivate that experience of submission by saying meaningless words

according to a set formula at a set time. That certainly defines a goal, and I can get better at the practice. I can measure myself according to how many mistakes I made in Hebrew, whether I was late or not, and, although Leibovitz might be hesitant about the next sentence - how much I am, really embodying that sense of submission.

In any one of these examples you have a defined goal. Tefila is serving something. And you should be able to evaluate what you have done today in relation to that particular goal which your tefila is going to serve. As Bob Dylan sings – you're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the Devil, it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody… So choose. Usually if we can make conscious, aware choices of whom we're serving, chances are we end up less in the service of our dark side then when we do it unconsciously. When we choose unconsciously, we often find ourselves serving all sorts of other masters and goals like our ego, our fears and all sorts of other things. But if I can bring this process into consciousness and say – this is

the goal I am choosing, and this is what I want my tefila to serve, chances are I will be serving better sides of myself and who I can be, and be in line with ways I can serve the world.

This identifying of goals is in no way unique to tefila. Anybody who practices anything (and has not like Paul Rudd professed to perfect it) knows this process. You have a particular goal, you have particular forms of practice, you return to those forms, you grow within those forms and they take you towards the ultimate goal. That is the practice.

That is why *keva*, the set form, is so important. The set form is important because you can never step in to the same river twice. You can't measure the growth of a child if the wall is never the same. When the doorpost or wall is solid and you're making marks on it, you can see the changes in the child's height. If the marks are moving all the time you will never see the change. In the same way, the form of the practice gives the solid standard against which you can measure how you have changed. For example, today I said

Vahavtah and I was in a certain spiritual place, and had all sorts of reactions to the passage. By the time I reach the exact same words tomorrow, who will I be? The prayer functions as my mirror, my mark. I can come back to the same practice day after day to see what has changed. Since the form is constant, the changes in the experience derive from me, and I can keep track of those changes. This gives me the ability to recognize when I am growing in ways I want to grow, and when I am growing in ways I do not want to grow; or perhaps generally I am growing in wonderful ways and this was a really bad day; or, I might have had a really wonderful experience today that felt like a gift from nowhere and tomorrow I'm going to be right back on my regular sequence. It is the set form that allows me to be aware of those processes.

These principles are basic fundamentals of spiritual practice and they work with tefila whatever your goals for tefila are, just as they work with any sort of practice that you take upon yourself.