DOES PRAYER WORK?
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – JUNE 20, 2014

1. Community prayer service Wednesday night
    a. YVR unique that this could happen
    b. It was uplifting and it was important
        i. As a symbol of our community solidarity with Israel and with Eyal, Gil-ad and Naftali
        ii. Because it gave us something to do in a moment when we feel powerless.
    c. Question of our time can Jews pray together
        i. YES – and it speaks volumes about the collaboration and genuine respect in this community amongst the rabbis and movements.
        ii. Yes we can pray together
            1. BUT WE WERE NOT PRAYING FOR THE SAME THING.
        iii. I don't mean to suggest we were not praying for the return of the three kidnapped teens. Absolutely we were, the difference is in the how. Or more specifically who.
    d. The Rav of the yeshiva that boys were studying at is the great Talmudic Scholar Adin Steinsaltz
        i. Brilliant, g'doli hador
        ii. When they were kidnapped he issued a proclamation, and instruction to all Jews that in order to save them we needed to
            1. recite more psalms
            2. check the klaf on our mezuzah
            3. do more mitzvahs

iii. He didn't leave out the role of the IDF in their return but he clearly posited their ultimate redemption on God's agency in the world.

1. Much was the same for many in the room Wednesday night.

iv. I don't fault them for their beliefs that bring comfort in such a harrowing time.

2. BUT There are numerous problems -- religious, moral, and intellectual -- with what we might call "traditional theology,"
    a. the notion that God is a Being with will, agency, and the capacity to abrogate the laws of nature, and possesses a proclivity to reward and punish like the meanest human being.
    b. As we experienced Wednesday night
        i. Individual and communal prayer have in them the potential for tremendous power.
            1. Prayer can force us outside of ourselves,
            2. help create and maintain empathy,
            3. form community,
            4. heal wounded souls.
            5. It can redirect our thinking,
            6. bind us to the past
            7. and allow us to make space for a connection with the divine.
                a. All of these are holy purposes.
    c. But using prayer as a magic trick is a theology fraught with peril.

d. The moment I believe that my specific mode of praying will work miracles, is the moment I will become disillusioned with God.
    i. I will, without fail, find myself disappointed in the end.
e. I admire the way many in the orthodox community find the wonder and miraculous in what we perceive as every day:
    i. a good sweet piece of fruit
    ii. the emergence of lightning bugs
        1. and thus offer prayers of thanks to G-d
    iii. but prayers for divine intervention in response to a human-committed horror is, I think a violation of the second commandment not to take God's name in vein.
        1. blaming a bad outcome on the lack of piety on the victims or their survivors is not in the spirit of what I believe Judaism is supposed to be.
f. So what good is prayer? If it can't move od to act on our behalf why pray?
    i. The answer at least for me is that we pray through God to motivate, strengthen and console our better selves.
    ii. SHARE THREE PRAYERS
g. For now, as far as anyone can tell, the lion's share of fault for the kidnapping falls on the kidnappers, the masterminds, and the nature of a society where these actions are seen as viable options.

h. When, please God, the boys are returned safely, the glory will not belong to those of us who prayed the best, or the loudest.
i. It will belong to the police and to the soldiers — themselves but a few years older than those frightened boys — who risked their lives to partner in a miracle.
    i. And to the boys themselves.
j. And to the Master of the Universe, who created us to be cunning, and strong, and proud, and protective of the people and the things that we truly love.
    i. And that will be more than enough.
k. May those who are searching for these boys find the strength and courage necessary to succeed in this mission. May those who hold them find compassion within their souls. May we all come to look beyond the hatred and animus that threatens the lives and welfare of so many people, and find a road along which we can listen to one another and find a livable solution that respects the humanity of all.