Lost and Found in Prayer

Based on a teacher by Joel Grishaver

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There is a story from the Baal Shem Tov, the first Hasidic teacher, that I was thinking about as I prepared for our service tonight. It's a story about *kavanah*, intention or what some rabbis have called, "heart-pointing".

I want to share it with you briefly.

"There was a king who loved music.

The king had a court musician who played beautifully. But after a while his playing got to be tired and bored.

The musician got tired of playing the same thing over and over. Every time the king asked for his favorite song it had less and less life in it.

The musician told the king, "Your Majesty, I am having a hard time being excited about this song. I have played it too many times."

The king had an idea. He brought in a guest and asked the musician to play his favorite song especially for this guest.

The playing was again wonderful. The guest made the difference. The music was again filled with feeling and meaning. Every day the king brought in a different guest. Each day the musician played the same song with new excitement. When he played it for a new guest it became a new thing.

But eventually the king ran out of new people to be guests. With no one new to hear it, the music became old and tired again.

The king thought and thought and came up with a new idea. He blindfolded the musician and told him a new guest was there to hear his playing. The musician imagined the guest, and his playing was again filled with spirit. The king did this every day and every day, the musician found the kavanah, the intention with which to play the king's favorite song."

(Shivhei ha-Besht, In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov)

Saying a prayer with meaning is like trying to shoot an arrow at a target. The most important part of shooting an arrow is knowing how to aim. The same is true of praying.

The Rabbis teach that the secret to praying is to imagine God actually listening to your words, like the musician who played blindfolded for the special guests.

Note that I use the word **"imagine"** God is listening rather than **proclaiming** that God is listening. A traditional Jew, one raised in yeshiva or perhaps portrayed on Shitsel understands that "faith takes knowledge"; those of us who are more existential know that the prayers of the service and the stories of the Torah take "a willing suspension of disbelief" in order to enter their metaphors and find meaning.

Prayers are like a ladder that goes from where you are to where God resides within you. We "point our hearts" and climb up to God on our prayers. Each prayer has a story. Each story is a path we follow in our heart that leads us to God.

One of the core problems with Jewish prayer is its kevah, its fixed nature. The rhythm of liturgy with little change is a challenge to most people's motivation. A sense of fatigue can emerge. That is why we created this service and that is the essence of this story by the Baal Shem Tov.

Siddur fatigue is nothing new. Here's the lesson: Even when there is nothing new, we need to create something new. Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav taught that the greatest sin in the world is to do something for the second time. Just like the king, we can't always find new visitors, but like the musician, we can imagine them.

Each "us" at our latest moment of prayer is different from the "us" that prayed previously. We need to look into the moment, this moment, for the newness we can find in it and bring to prayer this time. Look in and find the newness that we can take from prayer this time. It is like walking a path we travel every day. That familiar walk

gives us a chance to think and associate, we know the way so we don’t have to worry about getting lost, but we are different every time we walk it, every time we pray, an in the difference within ourselves as we pray we need to ask, what can be found?