

A journalist assigned to the Jerusalem bureau takes an apartment overlooking the Western Wall. Every morning when she looks out, she sees an old Jewish man praying vigorously, all morning long. So the journalist goes down to the wall, and introduces herself to the old man. She asks: "You come every day to the wall. How long have you done that and what are you praying for?" The old man replies, "I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning I pray for people to stop hating each other and world peace. I go home and have a cup of tea, and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth." The journalist is amazed. "How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?" The old man replies, "Like I'm talking to a wall."

What we do more than anything else on Yom Kippur is pray, an extraordinarily difficult activity for anyone who takes prayer seriously. Think about what you are doing during prayer, what prayer is supposed to accomplish, why you are saying the words in front of you, and who is listening to your prayers. I suspect that many of us have a certain notion of what prayer is supposed to do or accomplish, and we get frustrated and bored when we can't feel spiritually connected because we don't believe in the notion of prayer that we carry around inside.

I think what is needed is a reframing of the idea of prayer. We need to define what prayer is, and what prayer is not. This is not an easy task in a diverse community of people who approach Jewish tradition in a variety of ways and conceive of God in wildly varying ways. I want to share a bit of my personal theology of prayer with you - I hope it may resonate with you, or at least stimulate your thinking and thereby enhance your own prayer experience.

I was asked recently to keep someone in my prayers, because I was told that "I'd rather have you and God on my side," from which I understood the implication that my prayers influence God's actions. My off the cuff response was that I'm not always sure that God and I are always on the same side, but in this case it sounds reasonable. I have trouble seeing God's point of view with respect to earthquakes, flood, and tsunami, and there is an awful lot of disease and suffering that just doesn't seem fair. So while I am totally in favor of meaningful prayer, I don't find all prayer meaningful.

First of all, here is what I believe prayer is NOT. Some of us pray because we are hoping to get something. Let me just say that I don't believe in this kind of prayer for concrete tangible things. I have theological difficulty with the idea that we can ask God for things and expect that we will get them, whereas had we not asked God for them, we would not have gotten them. That is to say, I have trouble with the idea that God gives us things we ask for just because we ask, like some kind of Divine Santa Claus. I do not believe that prayer is primarily a means of getting what we want.

I think we ought to approach prayer in to the spirit of Pirke Avot (1:3), as serving the master like a servant not expecting a reward. In other words, we should pray without expectation that there is a connection between prayer and the thing being prayed for.

I believe that prayer is a means of expressing the deepest yearning of our soul. To put our deepest desires into words is to take the first steps in actualizing them. To do this as a community is to order our priorities. If we believe in peace, then every prayer should have a component that asks for peace. If we believe that we have an obligation to treat others with love, then our prayers should reflect love, such as the love of God. If we believe that we have a

responsibility to help those in need, then our prayers should reflect the hope that all people have their basic needs fulfilled.

I'd like to focus on one specific prayer -- the Mi Sheberakh prayer for healing that we recite every Shabbat and holiday service, and that I often share with people when I make hospital visits.

May the One who blessed our ancestors bless and heal the one who is ill ... May the Holy Blessed One overflow with compassion, giving strength and healing. May God send complete healing, healing of the soul and healing of the body, speedily and without delay.

The Mi Sheberakh raises a number of questions, and it's helpful to divide illness into three categories to address different sets of questions. First, with respect to what we might call generally transitory illness, which might be serious but from which we expect that the patient will recover, although that does not always happen, I have the following questions:

Does a Mi Sheberakh prayer have a measurable effect on the healing process? If not, why should we pray for healing? When we pray for healing, what exactly are we praying for?

We pray because one's attitude towards healing has been shown to have an effect on recovery, and prayer can affect and lift up one's spirit. This does not mean that prayer can effect major changes in one's physical state in consistent, predicable ways. No one ought to argue that prayer can consistently repair broken limbs and cure cancer. We pray because knowing that people care is positive healing energy. We pray because we are God's agents in the world, and prayer reminds us of our responsibility to take care of both those who are ill and their families. We pray because it reminds us that no matter how hard we try, we are not in control of so much that happens to us. Illness strikes all of us, and we may not be able to control either the timing or the severity. We pray because no matter what the outcome of the illness, we can learn and grow and share the lessons with others. The illness may not be affected by our prayers, but our attitude about it is. We pray for the elimination of pain and suffering, even if the underlying illness is not going away. Pain may be physical, it may be mental, and it may be emotional. Pain is treatable, although it is not always possible to eliminate pain while maintaining conscious awareness. Suffering is different. Suffering is our response to pain. All suffering is painful, but not all pain leads to suffering. We pray for *refuat hanefesh* and *refuat haguf*, healing of body, alleviation of pain; and healing of soul, alleviation of suffering.

The second category of illness includes chronic illness. Although we would never not want to pray for someone to be relieved of suffering, there are times when we need to be thoughtful about how and when we pray for healing. We need to ask questions like, How should we handle chronic illnesses in our prayers? Ought we put a person with a chronic illness on the Mi sheberakh list permanently, as if it functions in a preventative capacity? Should a person with a disability be put on the list? When are we praying for a cure - and by the way, define cure - and when are we praying for a change of perspective?

A person with a chronic illness needs many things, and perhaps prayer is one of them. But we learn in Mishnah Berakhot about the concept that there are certain prayers which ought not be said as a violation of taking God's name in vain. They are futile prayers, like praying that the baby in utero should be of a specific sex, or that the smoke we see in the distance is not coming from the house of anyone we know. They are vain and futile because the outcome has already been determined. The sex of the baby has been determined - we cannot ask God to change it.

The emergency vehicles are already on the way to put out a fire - we cannot ask God to move the fire to someone else's house.

Our prayers for healing need to recognize the fact that sometimes a cure, as in a complete elimination of disease, does not exist. We should be careful, then, not to pray for something which has already been determined, which is impossible to change. However, cure as in a transformation of how we respond to disease is possible. We need to consider the implications of what it means to place a person with a chronic illness or pain on the Mi Sheberakh list.

On the positive side, the Mi Sheberakh is a constant reminder of love and caring. However, my fear is that a Mi Sheberakh for a person with a chronic condition signifies that this person is and should see himself or herself as permanently defective. I don't think this is a healthy way to live, to continually be seen or see oneself as ill.

Think of it this way. Each of us in this room was or will be at the peak of our physical condition at some point in our lives. At some point in our lives, we will be at our best weight, our muscles will be at their strongest point, our reflexes, vision, hearing, and everything else will be at its most perfect. From that point on, it's all downhill, even if you are Brett Favre. When I am feeling less than perfect, I can take note of every ache and pain and be filled with a sense of regret that I am no longer perfect; or I can embrace the life I have within the current state of my body. In other words, I can conceive of myself as in need of healing to be restored to my optimal state, or I can conceive of myself as a body in a state of flux - always changing, perhaps with the possibility of some improvement, but as a body created in the image of God, and embodying a kind of perfect imperfection.

There is a related subcategory between chronic illness and complete health. What about a perfectly healthy person who lives with a physical disability? A wheelchair user, one who is deaf, blind, partially paralyzed from a stroke. The implication of the recitation of a mi sheberakh is that the person we are praying over is somehow defective or deficient in the quality of health. We generally feel bad for people who are ill. We have pity, and compassion, and we hope the affliction is soon cured.

When a person with a chronic condition or a disability is looked at as defective, it has negative implications for the role that person might take in our congregation. If we want persons with disabilities to experience full and enriching lives, work, and contribute to their communities, we need a theology of disability that does not see them as defective and objects of pity. Most people in wheelchairs do not want prayers said for them. They don't want to see their bodies as broken things in need of repair.

The final category of illness are those end stage terminal conditions, from which there is no reasonable hope for recovery.

Jewish liturgy recognizes a transition from a regular or chronic illness to an end stage terminal illness at the very end of life. We have a viddui confessional prayer, very similar to the Yom Kippur prayers, for those who are approaching death.

We say a Mi Sheberakh, but frame the intention very carefully. As I have said, the prayer includes the words *refuat hanefesh* and *refuat haguf*. Healing of body and healing of spirit or soul. We can understand that as physical healing and non-physical healing. Non-physical healing includes mental well being, a sense of peace, wholeness, acceptance of the dying process. When I say a prayer for a dying person, my inner intention is not for physical recovery.

Although sometimes the family is still thinking recovery, I am thinking release from suffering and acceptance of the dying process, both for the patient and the family. I am thinking of reconciliation, the chance to say goodbye, all of the things which to my mind constitute a “good death.”

We prepare now to begin a long series of prayers within the Yom Kippur Musaf prayer. We will try to take the focus off of our body and its need for nourishment and healing, and refocus on our soul, and its need for spiritual nourishment and healing. May the One who blessed our ancestors bless and heal each of us. May the Holy Blessed One overflow with compassion, giving us the strength to overcome the needs of our body and granting us the healing of a wholeness of spirit. And let us all say: Amen!