

Yearning to Pray

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NEXT WEEK, MY HUSBAND CHARLES AND I WILL BE going to Pittsburgh for a family gathering. It's a bittersweet gathering. Cousin Nick, who is 13, will be celebrating his bar mitzvah. At the same time, Nick and his parents and his extended family are mourning the loss of Nick's sister Leah. Leah was 15 last summer when a healthy tree dropped a limb on top of her. An hour later she died.

Nick's bar mitzvah will be joyous. It was long awaited and well-planned. It's part of the ordering of human life, and it will be comforting. Texts for celebrating Nick's bar mitzvah are found in the Siddur.

Leah's death was devastating. It was sudden, random, part of the disordering of human life. Texts that have helped Leah's family live with their grief are found in the Siddur.

The bar mitzvah day belongs to Nick. But he — and we — will hold Leah in our hearts. On our laps, we will hold the Siddur.

Sometimes life brings moments of joy so overwhelming that you yearn for an anchor. You want to make sure you can get lost in the passion of the moment and still be able to remember the moment. You want to know that it's safe to feel blessed, that you can enjoy and love and soar without having to look over your shoulder. You want freedom to fly and you want assurance. You are experiencing an *eit ratzon*, a time of great desire, great wanting, great yearning. And you hope that something reassuring has the same yearning to reach back and touch you. You hope that the One you address is also experiencing an *eit ratzon*.

Sometimes life brings moments of psychic pain so intense that you yearn for some kind of order, some kind of relief, some kind of reason so you

can think your way clear, some kind of lever that you can hold on to and restart, even if only for one second. You need a moment outside of yourself. You need a response from beyond the circle of your consciousness. You are experiencing an *eit ratzon*, a time of great desire, great wanting, great yearning. And you hope that something greater has the same yearning to reach back and touch you. You hope that the One you reach towards is also experiencing an *eit ratzon*.

When are prayers answered? Is it when the person praying experiences *eit ratzon* or when God experiences *eit ratzon*?

The Tanakh uses the words *eit ratzon* twice, but isn't helpful in answering the question.

In Psalms 69:14, King David says: *Va'ani tefilati, l'kha HaShem eit ratzon; Elohim b'rov hasdekha, aneini b'emet yishekha / As for me, my prayer is to you, God, a time of yearning; God, with your great love, answer me with your true saving power.*

Does King David mean to say that he is experiencing an *eit ratzon*, or that he hopes that God is experiencing an *eit ratzon*? It is not clear.

The prophet Yishayahu says: *Ko amar HaShem: b'eit ratzon anitkha / This is what God says: I answered you in a time of yearning. [Isaiah 49:8]*

Did God answer when Israel experienced an *eit ratzon*, or when God experienced an *eit ratzon*? It isn't clear here either.

The Talmud [Berakhot 8a] attempts to clarify.

Our sages ask: What is the meaning of the verse: Va'ani tefilati, l'kha HaShem eit ratzon/ As for me, my prayer is to you, God, a time of yearning? When is eit ratzon, a time of yearning?

One sage answers: when people pray in a community.

Other sages can't believe this. What if you came to pray in community just to support someone else in their time of grief? What if you came because your mother would be angry if you didn't? What if you came because you were walking by the building and you heard good singing? What if you came just so you could eat lunch afterwards? If most of the davenners (people praying) have no real *kavannah*, no real spiritual intention; if they have no *ratzon*, no yearning, how could their prayer time be an *eit ratzon*? Where do you even get the idea that God could be receptive to this kind of prayer?

Another sage answers: from the book of Iyov, Job, which says: *hen El kabir v'lo yimas / God does not spurn the mighty*, that is, the multitude, that is, the community of davenners.

The questioner continues: Is that because a community somehow achieves *eit ratzon*, or because God can experience *eit ratzon* regardless of human communal consciousness?

The answer comes in the words of Isaiah: *Ko amar HaShem: b'eit ratzon anitkha / This is what God says: I answered you in a time of yearning*. God is speaking about God's self and God means: I answered you in my *eit ratzon*, my own time of yearning. Not because of the quality of your yearning.

Hundreds of years later, the Zohar — the Big Book of Jewish Mysticism — picks up the thread. The Zohar teaches that God can experience *eit ratzon* even if no human being exists. Before creation, nothing existed except God's infinite energy. God experienced *eit ratzon*, a yearning for a moment outside the Divine self, for a response from beyond the infinite circle of primal energy. God experienced this yearning even before God articulated the first coherent thought of creation — before *hokhmah*, the flash of intuition, and before *binah*, the incubating thought. God's *eit ratzon* led to the creation of the world and to the creation of our consciousness.

In contemporary Jewish vocabulary, the metaphor of *eit ratzon* refers to late Shabbat afternoon, around *Seudah Shlishit*, the third meal. At that time, both people and God are yearning for a little more time together before Shabbat ends.

Once you start thinking about it, you cannot get intellectual clarity on this question of who experiences *eit ratzon* — God or human beings — because God is accessible only at the edges of our consciousness. We have no other tool besides our consciousness with which to recognize God when we meet. The meeting can feel like our reaching out touches God's reaching in — like our *eit ratzon* brushes God's *eit ratzon*. The experience of reaching might be joyous, as it will be when we celebrate Nick's bar mitzvah. Or it might be horribly painful, as it was when Leah's parents traveled to the site of her accident to find some reasons. We might make instantaneous contact or it might take years of scanning that edge. We might touch tentatively or with full force.

Some people define prayer as reaching towards that edge in your consciousness.

But there is an ambiguity in the word “prayer.” Does reaching out count as prayer only if it’s full force? Only if it’s immediate and deeply emotional? What if I am tentatively seeking, and I borrow someone else’s words to clarify my thoughts and feelings? What if I tentatively join a group, and let the musical passion of the group carry me along?

The Talmud says: that is all fine. Even if you are tentative, join a group. Hints of *ratzon*, yearning, will weave together, and together you will inch towards the edge of what you seek. God’s *ratzon* will reach out and find you.

Sometimes people worry that a Siddur is only an anthology of other people’s words, and that using it as a guide won’t bring about genuine prayer. The Talmud says: don’t worry. A Siddur holds so much pent-up *ratzon*, so much yearning, it will eventually carry you along. Join the group of the ages whose words exist in the Siddur.

Life may push you to reach out in prayer. It may awaken you in a dramatic flash, or gradually, with a nagging whisper. You may respond with unselfconscious personal prayer, or with a search for words that give form to your feelings, or even with a visit to a group you imagine has the knowledge. Accept the Talmud’s reassurance: all of these responses are genuine prayer, and every genuine prayer is answered — because *ratzon* is both the beginning of our question and the beginning of God’s answer.



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