

Tachanun for a Modern Jew

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And now, hear, our God, the prayers of Your servant and his supplications, and shine the light of Your face on the Holy Sanctuary..."

— DANIEL 9:17

I DON'T REMEMBER AN ENCOUNTER WITH TACHANUN

before I was in rabbinical school at Hebrew College. At the time, I was using the ArtScroll Siddur, a fairly comprehensive Orthodox prayerbook. I noticed that even though our services at Hebrew College were varied and dynamic, Tachanun was almost always left out. I started thinking about the meaning of the Tachanun prayers and started to pray them in the privacy of my own home, in the unique posture in which they were traditionally recited — prostrated on the floor. Since then, I have begun offering workshops to explore Tachanun further and to make this overlooked part of our liturgy more accessible to others.

Tachanun, meaning supplication, is a section of prayers which appears just after the Amidah, in the morning and afternoon services. It is also known as *Nefilat Apayim*, meaning falling on one's face, which reflects both the content and the choreography of the prayers. Originally recited in a prostrated position, Tachanun now incorporates the unusual posture of putting one's head down on one's forearm, echoing King David's plea to "fall into the hand of God" and the pray-er's utter resolve to fall before God as dust.

Tachanun is also unusual in being omitted from the liturgy on numerous occasions. The broad rule is that in times of either exceptional joy or exceptional sorrow, Tachanun should not be recited. This includes Jewish holidays and Rosh Hodesh, lifecycle events such as a brit milah or wedding, in a shiva house, and even on the yahrtzeit of a great rabbi. Perhaps the

frequency with which it can be omitted in traditional circles has contributed to Tachanun's *infrequency* of being recited at all in liberal circles!

I understand the discomfort some people feel with this liturgy, particularly in non-Orthodox communities. Tachanun is a recognition of human frailty, in an era when modern Jews prefer not to be reminded of it. When I pray Tachanun, I am one grain of sand in a vast ocean, I am only one star in a whole cosmos. It is not about my needs or my grandeur, but about God's Incomparable Compassion. This is challenging in our modern world, where the power of the individual is emphasized over and over again.

And yet, I have come to find in Tachanun a prayer of profound comfort, since I believe that God cares for and takes care of God's people, and even particularly me, in my smallness. Tachanun allows me to acknowledge the truth of the words *ein banu maasim* / we don't have any deeds — we have very little to show as a reason for gaining God's compassion. When we negate our individual uniqueness, we confront our mortality.

There is a tension here — between seeing ourselves as divine creations, and as dust and ashes. The words of Tachanun paint us as borderline worthless; and yet the fact that in the very moment of saying those words we are praying at all, indicates a trust that there exists a relationship between us and the Divine Creator. I personally experience God's compassion daily. I believe I am created *b'tzelem elohim* / in the image of God — and it is easy for me to believe that God forgives and cradles — loves and *pores/covers* me — with Her Shekhinah.

The well known story of the Baal Shem Tov's two pieces of papers is paradigmatic of this. In one pocket he would keep the note, "The whole world was created just for me," and in the other pocket, "I am nothing but dust and ashes." Living in the tension between these two spaces is incredibly worthwhile, and I believe it is essential in the mode of Tachanun. Praying Tachanun helps bring us to that middle space.

Tachanun was initially defined simply by the meaning of the word — supplications. The root word *chanun* means gracious, and is typically only attributed to God in the Torah. The word *tachanun* also appears in the Torah, and means supplication, as one who is seeking favor. Just like with other parts of the prayer service, the contents of Tachanun were not initially fixed; it took place immediately after the morning Amidah, and was a time for making supplication.

It is helpful to think about the substantial difference between the personal prayer of Tachanun and that of the Amidah in the formalized liturgy that we have today, recognizing that at one point in history, they each inhabited a prayer space without fixed words. At the core of the Amidah is requesting God to provide for our needs. Among other *bakashot* or requests, we ask for the healing of friends and loved ones, for the rebuilding of the Temple and the Davidic line, for peace, and much more.

In Tachanun, we only ask for one thing — mercy. In supplicating, in naming our tiny divided nature in comparison to the One, we are pouring out our hearts. We open up our deepest selves and hope for a relationship with the Divine. “Heal me, God, for my very bones tremble — my entire being trembles. God, how long? Turn to me, God; save my life. Help me because of Your love.”

We question the nature of so great a Being caring about little us and we simultaneously trust that it is true. “The One who knows our weaknesses remembers that we are but dust.” The traditional liturgy of the Tachanun prayer has plenty of words, but in essence we have nothing left to say (“I am nothing but dust and ashes”) after we have been so emboldened through the Amidah prayer to ask for everything we want and need (“The whole world was created just for me”).

In addition to the meaning of the Tachanun liturgy, we must also consider the posture of this prayer. Some believe that this section of the liturgy was originally recited in full prostration, as it still is in Yemenite and some Sephardic locales. Laying one’s whole body out on the floor, especially when other people are around, is not only a symbolic, but a very real, vulnerable position. Depending on the condition of one’s body, it is also a physically more trying posture than sitting or standing.

Today, though it is still called *Nefilat Apayim* /falling on one’s face, one begins these prayers with the head bowed on the arm in a seated position, a more restrained posture. Though we cannot know whether a full prostration felt like complete abandon in ancient times, it certainly can now, because it is foreign to our synagogue prayers (aside from the Great Aleinu on the High Holy Days). And this complete abandon for the sake of securing a relationship with God is exactly what we are trying to achieve in Tachanun.

Whether fully prostrated or bowing one’s head on one’s arm, as the prayers progress, one sits up and eventually stands. The symbolism of coming

from a low place and rising up should not be taken lightly. In the course of our life journeys, we encounter each of these postures, experiencing the highs and lows of life, mourning and celebrating. When we change our physical stance in prayer, we echo the reality of life's shifts, and become more mindful of our varied experiences.

Tradition teaches us that we sit when reciting the Shma, we stand when saying the Amidah, and then we prostrate for Tachanun in order to show that we have made every effort in praying. *Moshe Rabeinu*/Moses our Teacher also prayed in all three ways.

Real prayer is a vulnerable experience, and we want to bring our entire being into that place so that we can be receptive to the relationship and not only our own needs and desires.

I believe that if we can fully embrace the notion of supplication, vulnerability, and healthy distress in wanting to be closer to God, we can evolve this practice back into the synagogue in a new and ancient way. To that end, I offer a Tachanun workshop which examines one's relationship with God in prayer, and with one's response to the events of the world. The workshop begins with a study of texts (below) that examine the place of prostration in our tradition. The texts communicate that prostration is an emotive response, a full-bodied engagement with one's life and with God. Sometimes we recite these words without noticing the element of prostration — for example, the line in the morning prayer *Mah Tov* from Psalm 5:8: *As for me, in Your abundant loving-kindness I will enter Your House. I will prostrate myself toward Your holy Sanctuary, in awe of You.*

I am also interested in how we embody our emotions today, and how we can embody our emotions through prayer. In the workshop, we follow the text study with a guided meditation in full prostration. The meditation (see below) helps participants to place themselves in God's Hand. It is a way of bringing the self to fully trust in God's way. After the guided practice, individuals have an opportunity to use the traditional Tachanun, the words of their own hearts, or simply grasp on to the depths of the wordless abyss.

It is amazing what transformation can take place when we learn to regularly place ourselves in God's Hand, to be aware and embrace our emotional states, and when we reign in the ego by confronting that we are but dust. With humility, we can act in kindness, equanimity, and peace. We pray: "Please, let me fall into the Hand of God, for God's compassion is endless."

Guided Practice

At this time I am going to invite you to fall into prostration. Your arms and legs are spread out as you lie flat on the floor. Lie on your belly to be grounded or lie on your back to be receptive. Feel the weight of your body against the hard floor. Notice the position of your neck and face. Perhaps you feel some discomfort, perhaps you feel some restfulness in the position. Whatever you feel, accept it. Close your eyes, breathe regularly and allow yourself to be transported.

You have fallen into the Hand of God. God is holding you gently in His Hand, in the Palm, and you are comforted. You are trusting your entire being into God's Hand and letting go of any thoughts, conflicts, desires, hardness. You are melting against the immensity of God and you are vulnerable. Your heart is slowly opening to the process of letting go.

Your will is floating away and your desire is only to be kept still in God's Hand. You will not be dropped, you will not be forgotten, you will not wither away as long as God is holding You.

(Adapted from Jeremiah 3:21-25)

A sound is heard on the heights,
you can hear the house of Israel crying, pleading for mercy,
because they have forgotten their way and forgotten YAH their God.

God sees and God says: "Return to me and our relationship will heal." The people hear, and you understand the depth of that promise.

The people immediately respond to God: "Here we are, we are coming to you." Truly God saves. The people march to God, desiring to be cupped in Her Hand, just like you.

The people recall their crime. That they have worshipped the wrong thing. That their trust and faith has been in things and desires rather than spirit and love.

You hear them say: “Let us lie down in our shame, let our disgrace cover us, for we have forgotten ADONAI our God, from our youth until today; we have not paid attention to the voice of SHEKHINAH, to the voice of our God.”

They begin falling, one by one, like water falling from on high, like raindrops. They glisten in repentance.

And you feel a pulse in the Hand that is holding you close. You feel the beat of a loving God, of a God who cares for Creation.

Your own rhythm, the beat of your heart synchronizes with the One. You are attached. You are whole in the unification.

And you feel a safety that will not go away. As long as you remember YAH, HASHEM, ADONAI, Our God. Your God. Your love. God’s love. One.

We are but dust without seeing in each other and in ourselves the Holy Spark that connects us to Beyond. Remember, we are but dust.

Slowly bring your awareness back to this room. The floor you lay on against your body. Wiggle your fingers and your toes. Move your neck and scrunch your face. Roll to one side in fetal position for a moment before you slowly make your way to sitting.

After we sing the niggun/wordless melody, come to a face-down prostration. Use a tallit, scarf, or towel for privacy as you say your own Tachanun for about five minutes... You can use the traditional words, and you can use your own words of supplication.

Texts: The Place of Prostration in Jewish Tradition

In reading the following texts, think about what reason is given for prostration. Are there conflicting reasons? What kind of emotion is communicated through this movement? When is prostration an appropriate response?

GENESIS 17:2-5

“And I will place My covenant between Me and between you, and I will multiply you very greatly.” ***And Abram fell upon his face***, and God spoke with him, saying, “As for Me, behold My covenant is with you, and you shall become the father of a multitude of nations. And your name shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” (*Translation by Judaica Press/chabad.org*)

DEUTERONOMY 9:16-18

And I saw, and behold, you had sinned against the Lord, your God; you had made yourselves a molten calf; you had deviated quickly from the way which the Lord had commanded you. So I grasped the two tablets, cast them out of my two hands, and shattered them before your eyes. ***And I fell down before the Lord as before***, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sins you had committed, by doing evil in the eyes of the Lord to anger Him. (*Translation by Judaica Press/chabad.org*)

JOSHUA 7:5-7

And the men of Ai smote about thirty-six men; and they chased them from before the gate to Shebarim, and smote them at the descent; and the hearts of the people melted, and became as water. ***Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face*** before the ark of the Lord until the evening, he and the elders of Israel. And they put dust on their heads. And Joshua said: “Alas, O, Lord God, why have You brought this people over the Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to cause us to perish? We would have been content to dwell beyond the Jordan!” (*Based on King James Version*)

SAMUEL 1:26-28

And she [Hannah] said, “My lord, as sure as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here close to you, to pray to the Lord. For this child I

prayed, and The Lord gave me for what I asked. Therefore, I also loan him to the Lord, for all his days he is on loan to the Lord.” *And [they] prostrated before the Lord.* (My translation)

EZRA 10:1

Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, *weeping and casting himself down before the house of God*, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore. (King James Version)

PSALM 5:8

As for me, through Your abundant loving-kindness I will enter Your House. *I will prostrate myself* toward Your holy Sanctuary, in awe of You. (ArtScroll Siddur translation of Mah Tovu)

MISHNAH YOMA 6:2

And the priests and the nation standing in the court, when they heard the Ineffable Name come forth from the mouth of the High Priest, *used to kneel and prostrate themselves and fall down on their faces* and say: “Blessed be His Glorious Name and Kingdom forever!” (My translation)

B. BABA METZIA 59B

Ima Shalom was Rabbi Eliezer’s wife, and sister to Rabbi Gamaliel. From the time of this incident onwards she did not permit him to fall upon his face. Now a certain day happened to be the New Moon, but she mistook a full moon for a defective one. Others say, a poor man came and stood at the door, and she took out some bread to him. *On her return she found him fallen on his face.* “Arise,” she cried out to him, “you have slain my brother.” Meanwhile an announcement was made from the house of Rabban Gamaliel that he had died. “How do you know it?” he questioned her. “I have this tradition from my father’s house: All gates are locked, excepting the gates of wounded feelings.” (Translation by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein)

B. BERAKHOT 59A

Rabbi Alexandri said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: One who sees a rainbow in a cloud **must fall prostrate on his face**, as it says [EZEKIEL 1:28]:

“Like the appearance of the rainbow which shines in the cloud [that was the appearance of the semblance of God.]” *When I saw it, I fell on my face.* (Translated by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer)

AVRAHAM BEN HARAMBAM, RESPONSA #62

If you claim that prostration is forbidden because the other nations or the Karaites pray this way, we respond by saying: The Christians pray toward Jerusalem, and that does not forbid us from praying toward Jerusalem. The other nations stand in prayer, and we stand. They bow, we bow. (My translation)

RAV KOOK

“In Your abundant loving-kindness I enter Your House.” I approach God filled with a sense of love and deep yearnings, aware of the abundant measure of kindness in the world. This Ahavah is based on a preliminary level of Yirah, a reverence that recognizes God’s control and dominion over His house/world. This love then leads the way to feelings of submission and awe. “*I will prostrate myself toward Your holy Sanctuary, in awe of You.*” This is a higher level of reverence, the result of our consciousness of the inner Sanctuary, the Divine splendor and noble perfection revealed in the inner sanctum. We are overcome by a profound sense of Yirah, an elevated awe that is permeated with an inner kernel of love. (Based on translation of *Olat Re’iyah* by Rabbi Chanan Morrison)



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