

A Prayer for Those Who Don't Talk in Shul

Translated and with a commentary

Kenneth L. Cohen

Rabbi Hiyya said, "I have never concentrated on prayer all of my days. Once I tried to concentrate, but all I could think about was politics." Shmuel said, "During prayer, I count the clouds." Rabbi Bun Bar Hiyya said, "I count the stones in the wall when I should be praying." Rabbi Matnaya said, "I am grateful to my head, because it knows to bow automatically when we reach the Modim prayer." —Yerushalmi, Berachot 16a

A person is obligated to pray with proper intention and to recite all the blessings with intention, but there are very few people in this world who do so with all their hearts. —Orchot Tzadikim, Sha'ar Teshuvah, page 509 in the Feldheim edition

I liked being Jewish so much that I took the ultimate step and became a rabbi. Little did I realize at the time that this would mean that I would be the only one in shul who wasn't supposed to daven. Sitting on the bimah, I held the ultimate responsibility for the smooth running of the services. This, of course, is also a form of Divine service, but still, it isn't prayer. I would try to steal moments of *kavanah* where I could, but always drawn back to earth by the uncertainty that something might go wrong—that Mr. Goldberg wouldn't get his aliyah, that the Bat Mitzvah might need some encouragement, that somebody would drop the Torah. How could I be so self-indulgent as to seek transcendent union with the Infinite Source of All Life when my job was to be a captain of industry?

Things got a little better when I left the pulpit rabbinate for an administrative position. But having been a chatterbox since early childhood, sometimes the temptation to socialize still distracts me. I try to remind myself that kibbitzing is best left for the kiddush.

The tension between *keva* (fixed prayer) and *kavanah* (proper

intention) is an age-old one. How does one prevent prayer from become a rote, and therefore unfulfilling, experience? I discovered one tactic in my quest for *kavanah*. Periodically, I would change prayerbooks. The different pagination, different typeface, different commentaries would keep prayer fresh. For the most part, this worked.

A few weeks ago, I was davening from a prayerbook I had recently purchased, the *Siddur Ha-Gra*, the prayerbook of the Vilna Gaon. I enjoyed reading the commentaries of the great Lithuanian luminary and liked the feel of my new book: its layout, the crisp print and hearty binding. I felt as if I had been transported back to the 18th century and had become a Litvak (the week before I was a Hasid). But then I quickly shifted into my “bad boy” mode with a vengeance and started kibitzing. With a “disapproving” scowl, I looked at my watch and asked my chums why they came so late to shul. “But YOU are the one who just walked in!” came the playful defense. “No, I was out in the hall looking for YOU!” Laughter. Then I chided a single friend. Time for him to get married, I asserted. His parents were there. I informed them that I was on a mission from God to get their darling son hitched. They wished me luck. Then other friends came in with their kids. Soon I was busy teaching a 16 month-old to shake hands and say “Good Shabbos.” Then I turned my attention to the ten year-old in front of me, tapping him on the shoulder and quickly, before he could turn, directing my gaze “innocently” back into my siddur. And then it happened.

On the very page to which I had turned, there was a prayer I had never seen before. A special *mishebayrakh* (prayer said at the time of the Torah reading) for those who don't talk in synagogue. I offer this translation as an act of atonement and as a gift of love to all the other “bad boys and girls” who kibitz in shul.

The notes in the book attribute its authorship to Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Ha-Levi Heller (1579-1654), a Moravian rabbi and author of a standard commentary on the Mishnah, “Tosafot Yom Tov.” The note says that the prayer was composed during the Cossack uprising of Bogdan Chemelnicki in 1648 during which time upward to a quarter of a million Jews were killed. It was Heller's clear hope that proper intention in prayer would avert the disaster.

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May the One who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon bless all who guard their mouths and tongues and do not speak during the time of prayer. May the Holy One, Blessed be He, shield them from all trouble and misfortune, from plague and illness, and extend to them all the blessings which are found in the Torah of Moses our teacher and in all the books of the Prophets and the Sacred Writings. May they merit seeing their children live, thrive and grow in Torah, see them to the marriage canopy and to the performance of good works, and to serve the Lord our God always in truth and innocence, and let us say

AMEN!

מִי שֶׁבָרַךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן דָּוִד וְשְׁלֹמֹה, הוּא יְבָרַךְ
 אֶת־כָּל־מִי שֶׁשׁוֹמֵר פִּיו וְלִשׁוֹנוֹ שֶׁלֹּא לְרַבֵּר בְּעֵת הַתְּפִלָּה, הַקְּרוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
 יִשְׁמְרֵהוּ מִכָּל צָרָה וְצוּקָה וּמִכָּל נֹגַע וּמַחֲלָה, וְיַחֲלוֹ עָלָיו כָּל־הַבְּרָכוֹת הַכְּתוּבוֹת
 בְּסֵפֶר תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּינוּ וּבְכָל סִפְרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים וְהַכְּתוּבִים, וְיִזְכֶּה לְרֵאוֹת בְּנִים
 חַיִּים וְקַיָּמִים וְיִגְדְּלֵם לְתוֹרָה וּלְחֻפָּה וּלְמַעֲשֵׂים טוֹבִים, וְיַעֲבֹד אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 תָּמִיד בְּאֵמֶת וּבְתַמִּים וְנֹאמַר אָמֵן.

Rabbi Kenneth L. Cohen is Executive Director of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Seaboard Region. He davens at the traditional egalitarian minyan at Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, DC.