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A Meditation on Petitionary Prayer and Natural Yearning

Aim for a certain sweet spot, just to the side of the head pin; if the ball rolls into that spot, the pocket, all the pins will probably fall. Every bowler wants to hit the pocket reliably, frame after frame, round after round. To succeed, bowlers practice their footwork, their balance, their grip on the ball, their smooth release. Improving these skills, perfecting each step of the process, making the process reliable and repeatable, makes one a better bowler. After releasing the ball, the bowler tilts his or her head to an angle at which the ball seems headed for the pocket. Perfecting that tilt of the head can have no conceivable influence on whether the ball enters the pocket or not, but just about every bowler repeats that process on just about every roll, in my experience. Something compelling makes us want to watch the ball head for the pocket, even if we have to move pretty far to maintain the illusion that the ball is heading for the pocket.

I think just about every bowler also wills the ball into the pocket, wishing it into the right path as it rolls. We do not necessarily believe that our will can direct the ball, but, again and again, we do will it into the correct path.

In the same way, we will dangers away from ourselves. The soldier hears the bomb descending, and wills it away from himself. He may be an atheist, yes, even in the foxhole, and believe that no force on earth

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or in heaven will deflect the bomb from its course. The atheist does not violate his beliefs and pray, but I think he might wish the bomb to miss him without violating his beliefs. That wish, I think, might just be a quirk of the human mind.

Thus we hope, wish and yearn when we want to influence future events, even if we have no theory for how hoping, wishing, and yearning can change the otherwise destined future, and no belief that they can.

But we cannot always pray just because we can hope, wish, and yearn. Someone returning home after a hard day at work, heading for his own neighborhood, hears the siren of an ambulance, and wonders, with some dread, whether the siren comes from before his own house. He probably wishes, or wills, the ambulance to have stopped at some other house. The Mishnah tells him not to pray. It would amount to a *tefillat shav*, vain prayer (*Berakhot* 9:3).[1] The emergency has already happened at one house or another; too late, now, to pray for it to have happened somewhere else. But he or she may not be able to avoid hoping, wishing, or willing. We do this yearning even for events already occurring; the yearning feels somewhat reasonable only because we have not yet discovered where the ambulance has stopped. More striking still is that we even yearn in vain for past events not to have happened. Moshe Halbertal, in an essay called "The Limits of Prayer," mocks himself for rooting for his favorite basketball team as he watches a tape of a game that they have already played.[2]

A theater-goer experiences another astonishing example of wishing against all probability of having the wish granted. I look around during curtain calls after a particularly moving presentation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* and realize that other members of the audience also are crying. Why are we crying? Because, during the play, we will for the story to come out right; we want, hope, yearn, to see the young couple

1. Gerald J. Blidstein, in his article, "The Limits of Prayer," *Judaism* 15,2 (Spring 1966): 164-70 (reprinted in *Yavneh Studies 3: Prayer*, ed. David Derovan [New York, 1970], 41-50), collects rabbinic teachings that seem to disagree with the *mishnah* prohibiting prayers to change the past, though I think these teachings may only take small issue with specific examples.

2. Moshe Halbertal, "The Limits of Prayer," *The Jewish Review of Books* 2 (Summer 2010): 43-44. One of the anonymous referees for this journal asked me to explain why, if I maintain that petitionary prayer expresses our yearning, rather than our expectations to change the future, we should not pray to change past events. True, the past events will not change, but we still feel the yearning. It seems to me that at some point accepting reality should have a higher priority on our table of needs than expressing our futile wishes; so Moshe Halbertal explains this *mishnah* in his essay.

escape their fate, to see Juliet and Romeo happily living together at the end. Please, please, we wish, this time let Juliet awaken in time to warn Romeo not to drink the poison. She does not. Both lovers die, as we knew they would, and we feel bitterly disappointed that the young couple, once again, just as they have every other time we have seen this play—end up dead, just the way Shakespeare wrote it. Their deaths cannot surprise us, but do disappoint us.[3]

Although praying may sometimes be inadmissible when wishing, hoping, and yearning are fine, I propose that petitionary prayer constitutes a subset of the category of wishing or yearning. This thesis invites a variety of questions: How does praying differ from other ways of affecting events? To what or whom can prayer be addressed? How does praying differ from asking? Are some prayers immoral? Must prayer get restricted to significant needs? Does the text of prayer really express yearning? Must the pray-er believe in the efficacy of prayer? Does solitary prayer differ significantly from prayer in a group with respect to my analysis? How does this conception of prayer compare with other analyses?

Prayer: Addressed Yearning

Prayer, it seems to me, consists of addressed yearning. Prayers get addressed; wishes just exist. As a first approximation of this difference: If we believe in an entity that may receive our wishes, we easily translate our wishes into prayers; if we do not believe in such an entity, we probably do not want to do this translation.

But addressed to whom?

Atheists, pagans, theurgists, naïve believers, and philosophical believers each face different challenges in finding an address for their yearning.[4] An atheist generally does not consider prayer desirable, or

3. A few days after I wrote the paragraph about how I feel during *Romeo and Juliet*, the *New York Times* style magazine *T* (Oct. 19, 2014) found a writer to second my emotion. The editors "asked 15 renowned contemporary writers how, given a chance, they would alter the endings of classic books." Novelist R. L. Stine replied "'Romeo and Juliet' kills me every time I see it. I would have them rescue each other, get married, and go off on a honeymoon to a four-star hotel on the Grand Canal in Venice." I do not assume that Stine judges his revised ending as improving the play; only that, during the play, he wishes for it to end happily.

4. My teacher, R. Joseph Soloveitchik, observes that "prayer is a vital necessity for the religious person." See "*Rayonot al Ha-Tefillah*," *HaDarom* 47 (1978): 74 (my translation). The essay is translated in full as "Reflections on the Amidah," in Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New

even coherent.[5] For the atheist, none of the concatenation of forces which play out in our world add up to anything that can be addressed.

The pagan, by contrast, may pray. He believes in a world governed by numerous forces, some unconscious but many conscious; he addresses his prayer to one of the forces, thinking that it might pay attention to his needs, and that it, though in conflict with other powers, might have enough power to help him.

The theurgist—in my view, a kind of magician—might address his will to one of those same forces. Like the pagan, the theurgist believes in chaotic forces. Unlike the pagan, the theurgist believes that someone who understands the forces well enough can gain control of them by precisely performed rituals, and can force the right results. It is a kind of magic, or if you will, a kind of technology. Alas, we do not master the rituals well enough to get a reliable result. But in any event, the magician does not pray; the magician performs rites.[6]

Religious monotheists of all varieties make a dramatic claim: All the forces cohere and indicate one entity.[7] Whatever we do not know

York and Jersey City, NJ, 2003), 144-82.

5. For the atheist, I think, everything happens by accident. The forces of erosion shape the rock into the face of an old man, as we see it, and then they wear away that distinctive feature, but without intending anything, and without conveying any useful information. We have imposed the meaning on a blank geological event. Even if we accept the existentialist claim that human beings can impose meaning on the indifferent universe, "It is a tale told by an idiot, filled with sound and fury, and signifying nothing." Newton observed that the elliptical orbits of the planets and the effects of gravitation on earth follow the same rule; that just amounts to a pattern in the accidents, an elegant, beautiful pattern, one that ties together many events, but still just accident. We did not impose this order; Newton discovered it.

Believers, even philosophically sophisticated believers like Newton himself, somehow maintain that the universe, with its place for us humans, does not consist only of random forces, but is the product of God.

6. As a baseball fan, I indulged in the style of thinking that I call magic. As I watched a game on television, or listened to it on radio, I sat in the living room, where the straw summer carpet featured a pattern of squares. Before each pitch to one of my favorite players, I dutifully touched the corners of one square, like a baseball player touching the four bases after a home run. I did not have a theory to explain why touching the corners of the straw carpet would help the player; but I still performed the propitious act. This must have been the summer of 1959—the first season that Hector Lopez played for the New York Yankees; that player, as I remember, benefitted from my magical assistance. I was then ten years old. I do not think I was the only fan who relied on magical rituals; players, notoriously, also engage in magical rituals to improve their games. Do I need to mention that these techniques do not work?

7. A reader strongly suggested that I clarify this phrase, "indicate one entity," with the words "that stands behind reality" or, more traditionally, "that stands above reality." While I cheerfully use either spatial metaphor, I object to requiring a spatial metaphor.

about that entity, we know that we can relate to it as to a person, a loving parent or a stern ruler. When we express our prayers, our requests, to that benevolent personage, I mean, God, philosophers and other believers address a person-like entity.[8]

Does Praying Differ from Asking?

I am not permitted to address a petitionary prayer to anything but God.[9] This prohibition does not limit my permission to ask people for what I want. Even Rambam, who aggressively polices inappropriate prayers (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 2:1) would allow me to ask the waiter to "please bring me a nice dry red wine to go with dinner." I could even ask my dog to bring my slippers without offending Rambam. With anticipated improvements in robotics and voice recognition, I may someday soon ask a machine to bring my glass of wine, again without offending Rambam. Somehow, I may pray to God for assistance, and I may ask other entities for natural assistance, but I may not ask an animal for supernatural help, nor may I ask a supernatural being other than God for help.

It bothers me that I have introduced the word "supernatural" into this meditation on petitionary prayer. I usually treat that word with suspicion: I do not know how to define it. In this situation, I used the word to indicate the solution to a problem that I do not think I have solved yet, viz.: the difference between "praying to" and "asking of."

Let me start with concrete examples, and then try to formulate the theory:

There is nothing wrong with asking a person for assistance. I may appropriately ask the waiter for a glass of wine, or ask the waiter's forgiveness if I have broken a glass, or changed my order for dinner. If I

If we require the metaphor, we move it from metaphor to statement. We should not try to identify the spatial location of an incorporeal God. "His servants ask one another, 'where is the place of His glory?'"

8. Julius Guttman puts it concisely: "It is only possible to pray to a personal God . . . ." See Guttmann, "The Religious Motives in Maimonides' Philosophy," cited in Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart* (Albany, NY, 1995):8, and originally published as "Die religiosen Motive in der Philosophie des Maimonides," Leipzig, 1908 (later published in Hebrew).

9. The ancient rabbis prohibited slaughtering an animal—probably as a sacrifice—to any but to God alone (*Tosefta Ḥullin* 2:18, Talmud *Ḥullin* 40a). In the same vein, they warn against praying to angels (*Jerusalem Talmud*, *Ḥullin* 9:1). Rambam lists as fifth among the thirteen essentials of Judaism a prohibition on praying to any but to God.

ask the waiter to absolve all my sins, or to bring redemption to the house of Israel, I have gone too far.

I may appropriately ask my dog if she wants to go for a walk, or to bring my slippers. I may even ask my dog for forgiveness, if I have accidentally stepped on her tail. If, however, I ask my dog to absolve the sins of all Israel, or to bring redemption, I have gone too far.

I may appropriately ask a robot to do whatever the robot can do; if I ask the robot to absolve the sins of all Israel, etc., I have gone too far. That would amount to praying to the robot.

I may ask God to absolve all my sins, or to bring redemption to the house of Israel. That seems like prayer.

So far, so good.

What about asking an angel for help? May I ask the angel to bring me a glass of wine? Does that resemble asking a human for what the human can do, or does that resemble prayer? What about asking the angel to plead my case before God? This has raised controversy in Jewish history, often focused on whether or not we should recite prayers asking for angels to intercede and bring our prayers to God, such as the penitential prayer *Makhnisei Raḥamim*.[10] It seems clear to me that we must not pray directly to angels for absolution or redemption.[11]

What about asking my ancestors? Does Jewish law forbid asking the ancestor for wine or slippers? I do not know for sure, but it feels both futile and forbidden to me. I may appropriately ask a dead person for forgiveness (at least, according to Talmud *Yoma* 86a, cited in Rambam, *Teshuvah* 2:11). What about asking my deceased ancestors to plead my case before God? A familiar Yiddish phrase depends on their having that role, referring to the deceased as a "*gebeter*" (Hebrew equivalent: *meliẓ tov* or *meliẓ yosher*), but perhaps we should not ever invoke that phrase. Presumably, asking my ancestors to forgive all my sins and bring redemption to the house of Israel would amount to forbidden ancestor worship.

10. A discussion of this controversy appears in Shlomo Brody, "Theological Truths vs. Spiritual Vibes: *Nigunim*, Heresy, and *Machnisei Rachamim,*" in *Text and Texture,* a blog of Jewish thought of the Journal of the Rabbinical Council of America, *Tradition.* http://text.rcarabbis.org/theological-truths-vs-spiritual-vibes-nigunim-heresy-and-machnisei-rachamim/

11. See, however, Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford and Portland, OR, 2004), chap. 5, where Shapiro provides a list of Jewish thinkers who endorse prayers for the intercession of ancestors, deceased saints, or angels.

Our tradition considers asking an idol among the worst offenses. Norbert Samuelson, in his effort to define idolatry, accurately asserts that: "In the case of prayer, worship is idolatrous when worshippers entreat of the object what ought only to be entreated of the God of Israel." The key error of the idolater amounts to "treating the object of worship as something of ultimate value." This definition applies "no matter who or what that object may be."[12]

According to Samuelson's definition, which I accept, every petitionary prayer, no matter how pure, has a touch of idolatry, since every believing Jew (or Muslim, or other pure monotheist) directs her prayers at God as she conceives of God. In other words, we direct our prayers at the best conception of God that we can manage, which also means, at a somewhat inadequate representation of the infinite. Nonetheless, our tradition values prayer, though prayer always falls short. Samuelson calls this approaching God as an "asymptote" (252), since we can imagine a long curve from abjectly inappropriate conceptions of God to increasingly appropriate conceptions; we can approach closer and closer to an appropriate conception, but we cannot ever achieve the target.

To sum up with a chart:[13]

Entity	*Request for Object*	*For Specific Forgiveness*	*For Intercession before God*	*For Ultimate Redemption*
Animal	Yes	Yes	No	No
Robot	Yes	??	No	No
Human	Yes	Yes	Probably yes	No
Angel	??	??	Disputed	No
Idol	No	No	No	No
God	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes

Now I can formulate my question: how does prayer differ from mere asking?

12. See Norbert M. Samuelson, "The Concept of Worship in Judaism," in *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought*, ed. Daniel Frank (Albany, NY, 1993), 245-61 (248 in the case of prayer, 253, in the case of the thought of success).

13. Note that some of these items seem comically ineffective. For example, it seems silly to contemplate asking my dog to help fill out my income tax forms or solve the crossword puzzle. Asking an idol seems just as ineffective, but not as comic. Asking God for help on some serious matter strikes me as profound and meaningful, though I do not insist that it will turn out to be effective.

A tentative theory: if the entity can fulfill my request without resorting to supernatural action, then I may appropriately ask. If I want supernatural action, then my asking amounts to praying, and I may pray only to God. In short, prayer differs from asking because prayer must be directed to a supernatural being. Only I do not feel confident that I know what "supernatural" means.

The Prayers of Naïve and Sophisticated Believers

The Bible has literally hundreds of passages in which people address their wishes and needs to God, who often responds positively. Even if God does not respond positively, Job can say, "Though he slay me, I will trust in him" (13:15). The untroubled religious monotheist, immune to or ignorant of philosophic concerns, and faithful to the simple reading of biblical texts, can pray, easily and sincerely. Some believers strive to achieve this naïve faith.[14]

But even a more sophisticated or philosophical religious monotheist also speaks to God as if he were speaking to a powerful human. Relying on the Bible validates this strategy, since the Bible endlessly describes this One, who cares about humans, rescues the poor, defends the orphan and the widow, and answers our prayers. Many sophisticated believers say that addressing God in this way forms a kind of extended metaphor. Just as the naïve believer takes physical characteristics as metaphors, many philosophic believers take divine emotions, attributes, and maybe even response to prayer, as metaphors. To speak to God as to a being in heaven, far above us, who cares for us and answers our prayers, means to use a simile.

A simile for what? Coleridge observed that "no simile runs on all four legs"[15]—that is, simile does not produce an accurate or adequate description. Can other methods of description achieve the desired

14. An early reader objected to the word "naïve," preferring to use the Hebrew word for one who accepts the direct meaning of a text, the *peshat*. I do not mean to disparage the naïve believer. Schiller, in his essay "Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," contrasts the naïve poet with the studied "sentimental" poet, and sees many advantages to the naïve approach, unmediated by analysis. Some sophisticated religious thinkers prefer simple belief; see the discussion of prayer in the thought of Rav Naḥman of Breslov below. My teacher Yehuda Gellman wrote a moving essay preferring naïve to sophisticated penitence ("Teshuvah and Authenticity," *Tradition* 20,3 [Fall 1982]: 249-53).

15. *On the Constitution of the Church and State According to the Idea of Each* (London, 1830).

precision? Perhaps not. Robert Crease and Alfred Goldhaber consider imprecision typical of figurative language in general: "Metaphors are valuable when our experiences are enigmatic or difficult to capture, when existing words don't fit the situation at hand. Even the incorrect use of technical terms can meaningfully express what we intuit but cannot otherwise say."[16] Gershom Scholem allows that we could replace some figurative language with precise description, but insists that, in describing mystical experience, we necessarily end in imprecise metaphoric language. Similarly, I think, in our mode of addressing God, a philosophically sophisticated believer may accept as valid what he cannot explain with precision.[17] He may think of petitionary prayer as a kind of imperfect symbol.

Prayer as Analogy

Believers assert that the apparent cacophony of chaotic forces that operate on our world does cohere and indicate one entity. We believe it meaningful to address that One as if we were speaking to a powerful human. Like the atheist, rationalists like Rambam deny the existence of a compassionate God in heaven who judges humans and yet loves his creatures—denies, I mean, as long as we insist on taking those terms as referring to God's actual inner life. When we understand these terms differently, as referring to God's actions, the events of this world—Rambam's solution—we thus make a metaphor of those terms, and a rationalist could assent.[18] Critics, beginning with Gersonides, have raised objections to

16. Robert P. Crease and Alfred Scharff Goldhaber, "So You're Not a Physicist . . ." *New York Times* (Sept. 28, 2014).

17. Yoel Finkelman led me to Gershom Scholem's distinction between symbol and allegory. An allegory represents "an expressible something by another expressible something." In contrast, "The mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication." See *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941), 26-27. Yoel (my son) pointed out that Scholem finds this sort of symbol in the thought of mystics, and I see it in the thought of philosophers.

18. See *The Guide of the Perplexed* 1:43.

In a review of Ezra Bick, *In His Mercy, Understanding the Thirteen Midot,* Aaron Segal takes R. Bick to mean that "there is no obstacle" to making some statements, such as "God created the world," meaning them "strictly and literally." Other statements must appear in "loose and figurative language." To these other statements, R. Bick appends the rabbinic disclaimer, "*kivyakhol*" = "as if it were possible to say such a thing." See Segal, "A Religiously Sensitive Jewish Philosophical Theology," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 16 (2012-13): 194.

Rambam's approach to the attributes of God;[19] nonetheless, the sophisticated believer's petitionary prayer remains a kind of analogy.

Somehow, in the billions of years since the creation of the universe, conditions on a medium-sized planet orbiting a somewhat larger than average size star in a somewhat typical galaxy proved right for the existence of humans. We inhabit that planet, where we can meet all our needs. By accident or design, we live, breathe, eat, love, procreate, think, dream, imagine, thrive, age, wish, want, will some outcomes and dread others. The believer somehow reacts to that remarkable circumstance with gratitude[20] for the past, and believers turn yearning for the future into prayer. If we feel justified in humble gratitude for the past, which ascribes the boon we have received to God, we can perhaps feel privileged to pray for the future boon from God.

A slippery thought this is, constructing a prayer of gratitude to this One, and then using some of the language of the naïve believer, because we do not have better language, and that language somehow is analogous to what we really do mean to say. When we pray, we call on God as a being, as if we were calling on a person, and we know that as an analogy; we could replace the analogy with a more direct word describing the way we should address God, but we would have limited ability to define that word.

I see my enterprise as more limited than Segal's. I consider our petitionary prayers as figurative language, but I do not consider whether other theological discourse could qualify as literally and strictly true. Though it goes beyond the scope of this essay, I wonder how Segal would respond to persistent and detailed questions about what he means by the "literal" process of creation. What follows from asserting that the claim is literally true? In talmudic terminology, *lemai nafka mina*?

19. See Gersonides, *The Wars of the Lord*, trans. Seymour Feldman, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1987), 110 [3:3].

20. Can the atheist feel gratitude towards the unthinking, random concatenation of forces that accidentally have provided her needs? Yes, but perhaps the atheist would feel embarrassed by that gratitude. In a conversation with my late teacher, R. Eliezer Cohen, I suggested that the only difference between the sophisticated believer and the atheist might consist of the believer's comfort with the feeling of gratitude, and he replied that that difference might be sufficient.

However, the Greek philosopher Democritus maintained that everything in the universe consists of atoms moving in the void. Nevertheless, he found room for cheerful gratitude. Lee Billings writes, "We should be universally cheerful, Democritus believed, at our fortune to exist in a welcoming world with so many pleasures. His constant mirth at humanity's tragicomic existence led his contemporaries to call him 'the laughing philosopher'" (*Five Billion Years of Solitude* [New York, 2013], 79).

How Would a Sophisticated Believer Address God in a Literally Accurate Way?

Rambam actually hints at an answer, in describing the taken-for-granted place of petitionary prayer in the religions of his day. He says that his contemporaries would find it baffling if "a prophet in these times who, calling upon the people to worship God, would say, 'God has given you a Law forbidding you to pray to Him, to fast, to call on Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in meditation without any works at all.'"[21] Though the prophet's contemporaries would find him perhaps even scandalous, Rambam, I think, would welcome the prophet's bringing that message to an audience sophisticated enough to receive it. I intend to return later in this essay to what thoughts Rambam's prophet would have us think in place of prayer.

Trivial Prayer?

Not all wishes deserve to get converted into prayer. Some wishes may lack the gravity for prayer. I ought to win a game or lose it without invoking my deepest needs. I return to an example from sports fandom to illustrate this point:

In the closing seconds of the 1990 Superbowl game, the New York Giants held a one point lead over the Buffalo Bills. The Bills lined up for a field goal attempt, which would have given them a two-point victory. In the tense moments before the kick, television cameras caught several members of the Giants team, apparently at prayer, I supposed, praying that the Buffalo kicker would miss. It seemed not inappropriate for the players to pray, having bent their every effort to winning the game. As a fan, I could not contribute a prayer; I had watched an exciting football game, a nearly perfect game, and had received all I could want from the entertainment. The other team had come so close, and did not deserve to lose either.[22] It did not feel like a good moment for my prayers, although

21. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963) 3:32, p. 526.

22. An anonymous referee of this paper wondered why I thought it inappropriate, rather than immoral, to pray for the victory of "my" team. The actual players may pray for victory for themselves, though that means the other team must lose. A person will yearn, and may legitimately pray, for his own vital needs. (See the next section, on Saul Smilanky's argument.) By contrast, a fan has a heartfelt but trivial interest in the

I suppose I could still wish. Actually, I did not want to wish either. I just felt gratitude for the exciting game I had seen. Giant fans could all feel part of something bigger than themselves, but I could not join them.[23]

Invoking my deepest needs, as my teacher R. Soloveitchik has argued, should include a table of those needs, so I learn which needs belong; for this reason, trivial pursuits do not appear in the statutory prayer, the *Amidah*.[24] Realizing my gratitude, that in this improbable world I have what I need to exist, appreciating what exists, should have a place on my schedule; it does deserve that dignity. Accepting that I am not the owner, not in charge, deserves a place.

Immoral Prayer?

Philosopher Saul Smilansky suggests another limitation on prayer: prayers that good come to me count as immoral, when, as a consequence, evil would come to others.[25] In one of his examples, a mother must not pray that a vital organ arrive from a donor in time to save her dying child, since someone must have a fatal accident to make the vital organ available. If the mother killed a prospective donor, that would amount to murder, so the mother must also not pray for her child to receive a donor organ. Prayer, in Smilansky's vision, amounts to "action, rather than mere hope" to influence the future, and we should subject prayer to the "higher moral standards that apply to actions."

I endorse Smilansky's observation that prayer lies on a continuum with "mere hope," and I recognize that some selfish prayer deserves condemnation. Still, I find his moral scale too sensitive for several reasons. He sees prayer as a kind of action to change the future, where I see prayer as expressing our yearning addressed towards God.[26] When

team's success, not based on the fan's real needs nor on the moral difference between the teams. For him to pray for the team means to elevate a trivial interest to formal prayer, and that seems inappropriate to me.

23. I have since developed a more negative evaluation of watching football games. On every play, several players commit the equivalent of criminal battery. In nearly every game, some of this battering results in injuries, many of these serious. Years later, most players suffer physical deterioration, and nearly all suffer permanent brain damage. I can find some other way to entertain myself.

24. "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17,2 (Spring 1978): 55-73.

25. Saul Smilansky, "A Problem about the Morality of Some Common Forms of Prayer," *Ratio* 25, 2 (June 2012): 207-15.

26. Smilansky admits that "There is little moral difficulty if the person does not really believe that his or her prayer has any efficacy of the relevant sort" (210).

our benefit depends on the misfortune of others, Smilansky sees us as responsible to act and to pray from a neutral position far above ourselves, a universal position. In effect, he wants us to pray as he wants us to act, from a God's-eye perspective.

Return to the mother with her dying child. Smilansky would forbid her to murder a potential donor, which seems fair to me. Would he allow her to fill out the forms correctly to ensure her child's eligibility for the next donor organ? After all, if her child receives the organ, some other desperate patient does not. Perhaps the heroic mother should extend Smilansky's judgment to refraining from filling out the forms, and so too refrain from reciting a prayer for her child, as the child's benefit depends on misfortune befalling others, but I do not feel convinced. Not everyone can aspire to become like the liberal in Robert Frost's poem, "The Lesson for Today," who defines himself as "so altruistically moral/I never take my own side in a quarrel."[27]

It seems that Smilansky evaluates someone who would pray in a life-or-death competition as illicitly seeking advantage, as if prayer amounted to bribing the umpire. We must not cheat by talking to God. Though the ultimate Judge does not take bribes (Deut. 10:17), Smilansky rules it immoral to ask for a problematic benefit "just because God will be there to block one's prayer . . . if it is morally inappropriate" (212). Here, I think Smilansky's standard not sensitive enough. Even if we limit petitionary prayer to asking for apparently inoffensive boons, we still offer advice and instruction to the Master of the Universe, having first evaluated the advice to make sure that we are not trying to mislead the Master of the Universe to do anything that we, in our wisdom, consider immoral. If we have power to influence the Master of the Universe, we lack wisdom to do so. When we pray, our prayers always come with the caveat that we, limited beings, do not truly know what we need, or what the universe needs. In the words of Kierkegaard: ". . . [P]rayer does not alter the unalterable; but would that be desirable in the long run? Could not fickle man easily come to regret that he had gotten God changed?"[28]

27. Robert Frost, "The Lesson for Today," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ed. Robert Frost and Edward Connery Lathem (New York, 1963), 354.

28. *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession,* translated from Danish by Douglas Van Steere (New York: 1956 and subsequent reprints), 51.

I agree with Smilansky that some selfish prayers may indeed deserve blame, but not for the same reasons as he offers. In the hypothetical he calls Boarding School, a student prays that the headmaster of her school die a lingering death for vexing her. Smilansky finds this a reprehensible prayer because expressing a prayer constitutes an act to harm the headmaster, not a mere wish, and because the student may need to rely on God's goodness to protect the headmaster from evil. I find the prayer reprehensible not because of what it does to the headmaster, or what it does to God, but because of what it does to the student. As she prays for disaster to strike the headmaster, she becomes more vindictive, greedy, sour, and selfish. I have to accept that saying inappropriate prayers can change us in a bad way if, as I believe, saying appropriate prayers leads us to become compassionate, thankful, sweet, and caring.[29]

R. Joseph Soloveitchik, contemplating the table of petitionary prayers, asserts that "I pray for the gratification of some needs since I consider them worthy of being gratified. I refrain from the gratification of other needs since it will not enhance my dignity."[30] R. Soloveitchik elsewhere defines dignity as "dominating the environment" so as to meet our needs,[31] and so perhaps prayer always diminishes dignity, since in

29. An early reader of this paper, currently serving his sentence in the Michigan Correctional System for actions leading to the murder of his own father, reacted to the "Boarding School" problem as follows:

> Your understanding of the student in Smilansky's "Boarding School" problem obviously speaks volumes to me. To use your language, saying inappropriate prayers makes her (me) more vindictive, greedy, sour, and selfish. Spending years in such thought about my father exploded to action in the most horrible of ways. We really do become what we think, yes? Now, decades later, dwelling upon the positive, of helping others, and petitioning God to be imbued with morality does lead to the sort of appropriate person you describe.

Rambam uses a similar explanation for the prohibition against cursing people (*Sefer Ha-Mizvot*, prohibition #317)—cursing is prohibited because of the effect that the imagined and intended harm expressed in the curse has on the personality of the one who issues the curse. Note that this conception of personal dynamics seems opposite to the common hydraulic metaphor that extols the virtue of "letting off steam."

30. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah." *Tradition* 17, 2 (Spring 1978): 67. In "*Rayanot al ha-Tefillah*," (74), R. Soloveitchik asserts that "Suppressing liturgical expression is impossible. Prayer is necessary" (my translation). The religious person cannot live without some form of praying, but I wonder how often reciting the statutory liturgy satisfies the vital need to pray.

31. R. Aryeh Klapper reminded me that in "The Lonely Man of Faith," R. Soloveitchik defines human dignity as "dominating his environment and having control over it" (*Tradition* 7, 2 [Summer 1965], 13), thereby having the ability to meet his needs. R. Klapper suggested that prayer thus always contradicts human dignity. I feel grateful to

prayer one acknowledges dependency. Perhaps so; but accurately recognizing one's dependency for what one really needs enhances a human being, and crudely requesting a trivial or evil desire diminishes a human being. Praying for trivial wants, such as the success of a favorite team, or for disproportionate revenge, such as the death of the annoying teacher, diminishes the pray-er.[32]

Absolutely Futile Yearning

So, I suggest, prayer has great value, but I do not insist that only those who believe in its efficacy can reasonably engage in it.[33] If that seems strange, consider mourning, as described by Lord Byron in "Oh! Snatch'd Away in Beauty's Bloom":[34]

> Oh! snatch'd away in beauty's bloom,
> On thee shall press no ponderous tomb;
> But on thy turf shall roses rear
> Their leaves, the earliest of the year;
> And the wild cypress wave in tender gloom:
>
> And oft by yon blue gushing stream
> Shall sorrow lean her drooping head,
> And feed deep thought with many a dream,

R. Klapper for these observations.

32. An early reader, the inmate in a Michigan prison whom I cited in n. 29, writes: "you again make the distinction between a wish and a prayer. I pray for release; I wish the chow hall would have chocolate mint ice cream tonight. . . ."

33. The skeptic Ambrose Bierce points out the contradictions at the heart of petitionary prayer, in his definition of the verb "pray": "PRAY, v. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy" (*The Devil's Dictionary*, Guttenberg Project [EBook #972]).

The believer Kierkegaard, as if in response, asserts that "The function of **prayer** is not to influence God, but rather to **change** the nature of the one who prays." Emphasis in original. *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, trans. Van Steere, 51.

Medieval Jewish philosophers have already expressed both of these ideas. In a book about Rambam's conceptions of prayer, Ehud Benor observes that "Maimonides says absolutely nothing about conditions under which a prayer will be answered" (*Worship of the Heart*, 77). Benor further asserts (ibid.) that even Moshe de Trani, a medieval thinker who explicitly teaches the supernatural efficacy of prayer, still proclaims that "the essence of prayer is not a wish or an expectation that one's petition will be granted but a duty to proclaim that God alone is worthy of prayer."

34. From *Hebrew Melodies* (London, 1815), 15.

And lingering pause and lightly tread;
Fond wretch! as if her step disturbed the dead!

Away! we know that tears are vain,
That death nor heeds nor hears distress:
Will this unteach us to complain?
Or make one mourner weep the less?
And thou—who tell'st me to forget,
Thy looks are wan, thine eyes are wet.

We know that mourning, even done with great fervor and sincerity, does not bring back the dead, and yet we mourn. We do not believe that the dead can feel our footsteps on their graves, but, out of deference to the dead, we (in Byron's poem as in Jewish practice[35]) refrain from stepping on the graves. If Byron's rationalist critic challenges us for the sentimentality, the illogic, of mourning, Byron defends us by observing that even the rationalist mourns.

R. Moshe Isserles seems to distinguish mourning from wishing to alter the past. In his gloss (on *Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 476:2), he forbids saying "Well, what can you do?" when visiting a mourner.[36] That question implies that if we could change reality, we would, but the true Judge has decided more wisely than we. In my experience, mourners do feel "I would it were otherwise." The physician who strove to find a cure on time, the firefighter who tried to extract a child from a burning building, the lifeguard who breathed into the nostrils of the drowned swimmer, all certainly feel regret at the outcome of their efforts. Job says, "the Lord gives and the Lord takes, blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21), and his words have terrible force only because we know that he would want his children back alive again in an instant. Erica Brown experiences her sense of the futility of trying to console a bereaved mother, and dismisses her own act of visiting the mother, "But it's nothing, absolutely nothing. It's just the smallest thing we can do. It's because we can't do what we really want to do, which is to bring your son back."[37]

35. In his commentary on Mishnah *Nazir* 9:3, Heinrich Guggenheimer notes: "It is forbidden to step on a grave when burying another person." See Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud: Third Order Nashim, Tractates Gittin and Nazir* (de Gruyter, 2007), 735, n. 110. See also *Turei Zahav* on *Yoreh Deah* 363:1.
36. Cf. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Evel* 13:11.
37. Erica Brown, "Kindness Matters," *The Jewish Week* (December 7, 2014), 66.

The Efficacy of Prayer

A cynical skeptic might challenge a believer: "What sense does it make to pray? Do you really believe that God will change the future for you?"

The believer may answer: "I can pray exactly because I do not expect God to change the future for me. If I expected God to change the future for me, I would feel embarrassed to pray. Prayer makes sense, not despite my doubts that God will change the future for me, but because of these doubts."

We pray to God, asking that our entreaties be granted. From a certain point-of-view, we expect that God *will* not generally grant our entreaties, since the Universe seems governed by systematic rules larger than we. The Talmud expresses this principle as "*olam ke-minhago noheg,* the world continues to go in its customary pattern" (*Avodah Zarah* 54b).[38] We also anticipate that God *should* not generally answer our entreaties, since we do not have the wisdom to instruct God about what ought to happen. Though we must pray, R. Soloveitchik adds another reason why we ought not to pray: we are too insignificant to express our puny needs before the infinite God.[39] And yet we pray, acting on the unlikely possibility that our prayers will be answered.

Mark Twain, in his "Letter from the Recording Angel," considers the implications of the belief that prayers get answered according to the fervor of the worshipper.[40] The result are not pretty: an angel grants the coal-merchant's "secret supplication from the heart" for bad weather to increase the price of coal, and denies the same merchant's prayer for mild weather to benefit the poor as mere insincere "Prayer-Meeting prayer," contradicting the sincere prayer for bad weather. If we imagine the world run by an entity that behaved according to this rule, we might

38. R. Ḥiyya bar Abba says in the name of R. Yoḥanan, "Whoever prolongs his prayer and looks deeply into it comes to heartache" (*Berakhot* 32b). Rashi explains "looks deeply into it" as "he looks forward to having his prayer granted." This, says Rashi, "causes heartache as when a man looks forward to something and his desire does not come."

39. See *Rayonot al Ha-Tefillah,* 74: "If so, what is the nature of prayer? The whole essence of prayer as request and entreaty of the puny needs of the person, as we have stressed, is astonishing and wondrous to us. Can a person find standing before the transcendence of God, and spill before him petitions for insignificant matters?" (My translation).

40. Lawrence Berkove asks me to note that Twain particularly means to savage Calvinist notions of prayer as a special ability of the elect. That the angel also requires fervency or sincerity amounts to a side point.

want to pray for practical utilitarian reasons, but the entity would not deserve our prayers.[41]

Believing that our prayers should change the future has much in common with becoming destructively furious when we do not get what we want. The Talmud asserts that if someone destroys property in anger, it is as if he worshipped idols (*Shabbat* 105b). I know from introspection that I lose my temper when faced with the realization that things have not turned out the way I want. As such, my anger is based on the belief that what I want to happen should happen. This feeling exactly matches Albert Ellis's observation that destructive anger comes from that word, "should": Ellis asserts that a reasonable person can become sad and disappointed when he does not get what he wants.[42] A reasonable person will not become irrationally miserable or destructively furious, since she accepts that one does not always get what one wants, and disappointing things happen to everyone from time to time. A person who illogically believes that she "should" get what she wants might well catastrophize, exaggerating "I cannot live with this outcome." She might feel justified in becoming irrationally miserable and destructively furious. In short, when I believe that the world ought to accord with my wishes, I believe that my prayers should determine the future, and I become furious when I meet disappointment. That belief that the world ought to accord with my wishes amounts to idolatry, because it sets *me* up as a god.

If we believed that our prayers would influence the future, that in all probability God would obey our requests, our prayer would resemble magic. We would believe that we have the ability to command the Deity. Our prayer would place us with the magicians on the wrong end of the long curve towards an appropriate concept of God.

If we believed that God should make the future fulfill what we request, that we deserve to have the outcomes we want, that in our wisdom we can instruct God to satisfy our needs, then our prayer places us among the idolaters, again on the wrong end of the long curve towards an appropriate concept of God. In fact, we would have a peculiar form of idolatry: the belief that we should control the universe, that

41. All of Smilansky's ethical problems about prayer would have force in Twain's universe, where prayers generally come true. In that universe, we would have to take care not to mislead the angel into granting evil or thoughtless prayers. We would have to work hard not to become like the characters in folktales across the world who have wishes granted, and use their wishes unwisely.

42. Albert Ellis, *How Stubbornly to Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything: Yes, Anything* (New York, 1988).

what we wish for deserves to happen, amounts to the belief that we are God, or ought to be.[43]

In the past paragraphs, I used the social metaphor to describe petitionary prayer. If I try to conceive of a more austere metaphor, I get this: Imagine that all the forces that drive the universe cohere into One.[44] I, a mere human, have the desire to articulate my yearning before that One. I feel privileged to have permission to articulate my yearnings, but I would feel astonished to learn that that One generally bends those universal forces to meet my desires.[45]

In my petitionary prayer, I humbly recognize that what I want does not generally determine the future. The possibility that my prayer will not succeed, from this perspective, qualifies not as a refutation of prayer, or even as a logical challenge to prayer, but as an absolutely necessary prerequisite for prayer. Samuelson, in explaining the thought of Levinas and Schwartzschild on a related point, asserts that "The thought of success is not merely of secondary importance; it is the essence of idolatry" (253). I leave aside the question of whether in fact prayer can influence the future; as long as I think it unlikely, I can pray.

This paradox brings a curious parallel to mind. The ideal of romantic love appears in its most elaborate form in the poems of the Provençal troubadours, especially in the work of Bernart de Ventadorn (who lived ca. 1130/40 to ca. 1190/1200). The troubadour wrote poems expressing his longing for a high-born and beautiful woman, whose name he often conceals. In these poems, he deeply desires intimate relations with her, but he cannot get even a sign of encouragement from her. Though this disappoints him, it also ennobles him, for the lady has such good qualities that even longing for her improves all his qualities. No one can be truly noble without experiencing this kind of longing. As the poet looks around him, he sees some contemptible men who write poems of longing for sexual union with women who actually become available; the poet sees these men as crass. The poet sees other bloodless men who write poems about high-born beauties who exist only in their minds;

43. Cf. *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 98:5: "Do not think, I am worthy of having the Holy One, Blessed be He, fulfill my request, since I have sincerely focused my prayer . . ."
44. One who stands, in traditional terms, "above" the universe, or perhaps less traditionally, "behind" the universe, a useful metaphor as long as we do not insist on the spatial implications. See also n. 9 above.
45. "The will of those who fear him He does," according to Ps. 145:19, but so much of what humans yearn for turns out to need undoing: we drain swamps that later we decide needed flooding; we dam rivers that later need to run free.

these men want to look like noble poets, but they do not have real desire in their hearts. Only the true poet feels ennobled by his hopeless love for a real lady of high quality.[46]

Looked at as a love-poem, the troubadour lyric seems only ridiculous. For some silly reason, the lover feels proud of an inevitably frustrating relationship. Looked at as a metaphoric description of a religious quest, the troubadour lyric describes the very paradox of petitionary prayer. The poet, philosopher or mystic, wants something from God; at its most refined level, he wants a kind of union with God. Any entity which could grant that union would not be the transcendent God. Any religious poet who boasts of achieving union with God defines himself as a crass individual, someone who has no real knowledge of God. Any poet who just goes through the motions of claiming that he wants union with God has not really achieved religious fervor. Only the poet who begs for an impossible boon from God knows the significant quest and its inevitable frustration.

Prayer and Practical Endeavor

I think that even the rationalist who mocks Byron's tears wishes, and wills, and tilts his head as the bowling ball rolls down the alley. The religious personality, on occasion, converts that wishing, that willing, into genuine prayer, and need not apologize for doing so.[47] Indeed, we feel the lack of some important part of a personality in one who would refuse to mourn, and perhaps we feel the presence of something important in someone whose prayers have seemliness. Somehow, genuine mourning expresses who we are, and perhaps genuine prayer as well.

By the way, the feeling that I am not in charge can produce a delicious sense of relief. Some wise people can even master adversity by letting go of the desire to control what they cannot control. However, there are items that I can control. Like those who believe in magic, some

46. An anthology of troubadour love lyrics thus resembles a file of elegant applications by Groucho Marx for membership in clubs that would not accept him.

47. I endeavor, in this essay, to find out why a sophisticated believer can pray; David Shatz suggests extending the argument to explain the prayers of a total atheist—if total atheists do indulge in prayer. Elie Wiesel records, in *Night,* the experience of praying to "this God in whom I no longer believed." See *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York, 2006), 91. Avi Sagi argues that prayer does not require belief in God. See his *Piẓu'ei Tefillah: Tefillah le-Aḥar 'Mot ha-Kel'* (Ramat-Gan, 2011). Sagi's book came to my attention too late to integrate it into this essay.

people believe in their own ability to control events. Unlike the magician, the scientist and inventor and technologist really can control events and ameliorate the human condition.

R. Soloveitchik, in *The Lonely Man of Faith*,[48] finds two portraits of humanity in the two creation stories at the beginning of *Bereshit*. Adam, in the first story, masters creation. Adam, in the second, feels loneliness, seeks companionship from God, from animals, and from the woman, and faces existential, insoluble problems. Adam, in the first story, has the ability to invent instruments to expand human dignity. We would not be better off if Adam the first learned to accept reality or to let go. These two stories, of course, do not describe two different types of human being. They rather describe two archetypes; we oscillate between the two. To do so wisely, we really do need Reinhold Niebuhr's prayer, "Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other."

Niebuhr's distinction may indeed explain the Mishnaic rabbis' opposition to prayers to change the past. The Mishnah asks us to bless God for the bad as we do for the good, and not to pray to alter the past. Moshe Halbertal formulates these two demands as: "When bad things are still avoidable, a person ought to fight them with all his strength. He should act on his own using practical means and simultaneously petition God up to the last moment. But once the events have actually occurred, he should shift from demand to acceptance."[49]

Other Possible Benefits of Petitionary Prayer

The act of prayer can have other benefits. I have had the experience of referring to an ailing friend by name at the appropriate place in my statutory prayer, and then realizing that I had to alter what could be altered, and visit the friend as well—saying the prayer reminded me that I had something to do.

One can visit a friend at the hospital without praying; but one has to, at some point in the visit, wish that the patient recover. Even the atheist can make that wish. The religious person can wish to God that person would recover. Anyone who visits the sick can wish that things were not as they are, that the patient had not become sick, or had

48. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith." *Tradition* 7, 2 (Summer 1965): 5-67.
49. Halbertal, "The Limits of Prayer," 43.

already recovered; the religious person, according to the Mishnah, must not make that wish "to God," must not convey that wish into a prayer. And yet, that wish seems the very essence of visiting the sick; though we should not pray to change the past, Halakhah demands that we pray for the patient's future.[50] My teacher R. Joseph Soloveitchik noted that, when he was a patient, he felt a dreadful sense of aloneness;[51] the experience of having a visitor praying alongside the patient might partially alleviate that feeling.

The funeral of one who died young, or a visit to the mourners who have lost a young relation, makes the same demand. One who visits the survivors has to think this impossible thought for the visit to have the quality of calling on a mourner.

Group Prayer

I have written, thus far, about the solitary experience of wishing, and the process by which that turns into prayer, for some of us, some of the time. I have left out of this calculus the experience of a large group wishing together, as sports fans do, the group experience of singing together, as campers do, and the group experience of praying together, sometimes with song, as congregations do. I know an observant Jewish rationalist who decries singing at prayer as distraction from the meaning of the words of the prayers: in his words, a mere "holy hootenanny." It seems to me that maybe wishing together with the group, and singing together with the group, contains the meaning of the prayer more than the actual words do. Spectators at a marathon also become a group as they call out encouragement to the runners going by. Those runners report that they really do gain strength from the encouragement. So, too, fans in the stands urge the football player

50. R. Moshe Isserles, gloss on *Shulḥan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 335:4: "Anyone who visits and does not request mercy for him has not fulfilled the commandment."

51. See R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17,2 (Spring 1978): 32-33 and "Out of the Whirlwind," in *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City, NJ, 2003), 134. Regarding praying together, note the comment of the Rav reported by Lawrence Kaplan: "The prayer of the community is rooted in the gesture of praying together, not in that of praying for each other. . . . To pray for each other means to live through a common passional experience which urges, which impels man to pray together." See Lawrence J. Kaplan, "On Translating *Ish ha-Halakhah* with the Rav: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's Notes to Halakhic Man," in *Mentor of Generations: Reflections on Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Zev Eleff (Jersey City, NJ, 2008), 338-39.

to run (though he was already doing so without their urging, and he probably cannot hear their cheers).[52] More than that, the fan in his living room urges the player on his television screen to run, without any rational expectation that the player can hear him. Many fans, I think, do without magical rituals, but every fan has to will the favorite team's success. You simply do not count as a fan at all if you do not exert your will to have the team succeed. Several fans together get swept up in willing together; they form a group, they feel themselves part of a larger whole. Fans in groups experience the exhilarating sense of belonging to a powerful entity. Standing together before the home team bats in the seventh inning, performing the wave together, and, especially, chanting together, molds disparate individuals into a unified aggregation. It makes a fan feel part of an entity bigger than any one person, an entity that outlives its individual members; in that way, becoming a fan resembles entering a religious community. I lived at one point in the Boston area, surrounded by Red Sox Nation (as the team's fans are called). The act of willing success to the Red Sox constitutes this nation, serves as its naturalization ceremony. In a parallel way, the experience of chanting an ancient prayer together with hundreds of other worshippers binds us into a congregation, makes us feel part of larger whole which will outlast our individual lives.

Individuals also habitually wish each other well. From the most prayerful formula recited during the Days of Awe, "that he pleads for him, and blesses him that he merit in these days to be written and inscribed in the book of good life" (*Kiẓẓur Shulḥan Arukh* 128:2) to the salesclerk's most offhand "Have a nice day," our parting words typically bind us together with good wishes. The most secular among us still wish us "Good luck," or even, "Good bye," which, etymologically, means "God be with you." [53] My late mother-in-law, Rosalie Koenig, not mobile in her final years, asked "Why am I still here? I cannot do anything. I can pray for people." In that vein, she expressed her wish for fellow-patients, staff, nurses, doctors, and relations with the words "only blessings." They seemed heartened by the wish.

52. My thanks to David Shatz for this example.

53. In Joanne Greenberg's story, "Certain Distant Suns," a thoroughgoing atheist refuses to use the words "Good bye." The story appears in *High Crimes and Misdemeanors* (New York, 1980).

Interim Summary

Before I began this line of thought, prayer seemed to me an activity peculiar to religious believers. Now I think of prayer as a subset of a widespread, perhaps universal, human activity. Humans generally do this wishing, wanting, and yearning. Only some of us do a kind of yearning called petitionary prayer.

The rabbis, as I now see them, used their moral suasion to discipline our wishing and wanting. We should become, under their tutelage, wiser, people who want in a wiser, and more refined way. We should become aware of those desires which a sensitive person should have, and should pray for, and those which we should not express in prayer. Most of the rabbis join in this effort to refine our willing and wanting. The sweet spot, the prayer equivalent of the pocket in bowling, comes when one knows well before God what to want.

Alternative Visions of Prayer

Let me focus, for a moment, on two who recommend something other than refining our crude yearning into elegant prayers. R. Naḥman of Breslov departs from this model of prayer that refines the sophisticated pray-er. Rav Naḥman says that, in addition to the statutory prayers, we ought to set aside some time and some private place for personal prayers, in which we call out our needs without any sophistication at all, like a child begging its parent.[54] We should say these prayers, not in the elegant Hebrew of the prayerbook, but in plain Mama-loshn, in Yiddish. We ought to have an intimate enough relationship with God that we can hold nothing back, that we can express everything, as freely as possible. The statutory prayers belong in the synagogue, and these free form prayers belong in the forest, or in some private spot at our homes. According to Rav Naḥman, we need to cultivate our simple needs, not refine them.[55]

54. *Likkutei Moharan* 2:78.

55. *Likkutei Moharan* 2:46. Apparently, R. Soloveitchik would not agree. He asserts that even when threatened by wild beasts or armed robbers, a person "who does not have the power to lay out before the Lord all the order of prayer in its original version, to put his praise of God in order, and to ask permission for his audacious approach . . . has no permission to request his needs" ("*Rayanot al Ha-Tefillah*," 89). In another essay, however, he describes engaging in exactly the kind of prayer recommended by Rav Naḥman. R. Soloveitchik, visiting his dying wife, could not bring himself to pray in the hospital; as soon as he returned to his apartment, "I would rush to my room,

For Rav Naḥman, we hit the sweet spot when we call out our needs in simplicity, without thought.

Rambam departs in the opposite direction. Rambam strongly implies, in the *Guide*, that a person who strives for human perfection strives to transcend the desire to request anything.[56] This self-perfecting person rather uses time to contemplate the knowledge of the perfect, unchanging, ultimate reality. He develops a philosophical distance from the vanities of this world, from things which have only contingent existence, and meditates on the ultimate reality, which exists by necessity. A person who approaches success in achieving this state of mind cannot be bothered by his own personal wants, or even the ideal wants of his people (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:51). Rambam, if I understand him correctly (a necessary qualifier), has a Buddhist flavor.[57] The person who tends towards perfection does not want, does not will. Adam originally, according to Rambam, did not see the world in terms of good and bad, but in terms of true and false (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:2). The perfecting person returns to that prelapsarian state; he does not yearn for anything but the knowledge of God; he does not fear anything but absence of the knowledge of God. So, for Rambam, this perfecting person transcends the need to pray for what he needs, or what anyone needs.

Paradoxically, Rambam says that only one whose mind concentrates upon the knowledge of God to the extent that humans can achieve such knowledge, achieves special divine providence.[58] Does that mean, as it seems to say in literal terms, that God intervenes in miraculous ways to protect and benefit this person? Or does it mean that this person does not request anything from God, accepts everything as an act of God, and so achieves perfect independence from needing and wanting? Of all human beings, only this philosophically detached person can have his wants met, for only he has no wants. "If a man's thought is free from distraction, if he apprehends Him, may He be exalted, in the right way and rejoices in what he apprehends, that individual can never be afflicted with evil of any kind."[59] For Rambam, the sweet spot comes when one escapes the need to need.

fall on my knees and start praying." This passage appears in "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17, 2 (Spring 1978): 33.

56. See also Benor, *Worship of the Heart*, chap. 1.

57. Rambam follows Sufi teachers here.

58. See also *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:17,18. "Providence is consequent upon the intellect" (Pines translation).

59. *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 3:51, p. 625.

R. Naḥman and Rambam express diametrically opposed models of prayer, and yet both seem attractive to me. If, as I have argued, prayer exists on a continuum with wishing and wanting, the more aware a religious person becomes, the more effective he should become at expressing his wishes; hence, Rav Naḥman. Rav Naḥman strikes me as insightful. A person can achieve a kind of false sophistication, the feeling that he has transcended needing, wanting and wishing, by becoming unaware of what he really wants. In his effort to become a philosopher, he instead becomes emotionally blind. If he would value expressing his wants and wishes clearly, he would become more, not less, aware.

Rambam's view, too, strikes me as compelling. A person achieves a kind of wisdom by transcending trivial wants and needs, rejecting wishful thinking and accepting what truly exists. She thus feels the need to pray about fewer of her hopes. If the rabbis ask ordinary believers to overcome the temptation to recite futile prayers for the past and trivial prayers for the future, then a great religious personality who strives for dispassionate knowledge of God may hope to disconnect from wanting and wishing about all temporary phenomena. At the end point, she would feel the desire to want only knowledge of God. She cares only about knowing the eternal truth; hence Rambam.

Normal people do not achieve Rambam's end point. Normal people still want to have meaningful work, to have enough to eat, a safe place to live, and fulfilling relationships with others. They want their relations and friends, and even strangers, to enjoy these same goods. Normal people do not become indifferent to the temporary goods of this world. Petitionary prayer, asking for these and other worthy goods, remains a value for normal people.

Conclusion

The contrasting recommendations of Rambam and R. Naḥman serve as a kind of fitting summary for this whole essay: R. Naḥman wants us to try to become naïve religious believers, but if we have not become naïve believers, how do we, sophisticated believers, still value prayer at all? Until one has, like Rambam's hero, reached the highest levels of detachment from the temporary world, one feels the need to express desires, to wish, to will; most of us will never reach those highest levels of detachment. As I write this essay, I hope, and will, and wish, that I find good

words. I want my words to hit the sweet spot, so that readers will say, yes, you illuminated something true about the experience of praying, and wishing, and willing.

Acknowledgments

I owe thanks for their helpful comments and questions to the first readers of this essay, especially Aviva Cohen, Douglas Burgess, and Yoel Finkelman. I also thank the two anonymous referees, along with David Shatz, all of whom who inspired me to think further and, I hope, more deeply.