



RELISHING PANDEMIC PRAYER, BUT YEARNING TO RETURN

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed so many aspects of our lives: the way we work, the way we study, the way we communicate with family, friends, and co-workers. How has it changed our most important relationship — our connection with Hashem? Have our tefillah conversations undergone a transformation? Are we davening in a more — or less — meaningful way amid this crisis? What can we learn from the crisis that can be applied to our tefillah after the pandemic?

“Mi-ma’amakim keraticha Adonai”
— From the depths I call out to You, My God. The saying goes that there are no atheists in a foxhole. An

existential crisis often drives us to genuine tefillah, to moving, heartfelt pleas. I assume that you, like me, have had moments, especially early in the pandemic, when we were brought to tears out of anxiety and desperation. I broke down multiple times in March and April during my Amidah when hearing ambulance sirens outside my home. It seemed for a time that the world as we knew it was coming apart, and that palpable fear raised the quality of our prayers. For much of this year, however, our tefillot suffered. Yes, the constant dread *should* have helped us to pray. But most of the time, our inability to focus and our mental exhaustion from this prolonged crisis have made it difficult

to rise to the occasion of thrice-daily meetings with God. We needn’t be too hard on ourselves; it is only natural to struggle with tefillah when our day-to-day existence leaves us with little peace of mind.

We have also largely been banished from our shuls. We have lost the beauty, grandeur, and holiness of our miniature Temples, along with the inspiration provided by *devarim she-be-kedushah*, communal singing, uplifting baalei tefillah, and the warm feeling of joining as a community to encounter the Divine. Even when we have the *zechut* to gather for a minyan, whether in the synagogue or in some sort of tent, we find ourselves rushing

through the davening, either to avoid the dangers of extended exposure to strangers or to manage the discomfort of the weather.

At the same time, we have been surprised to find joy and meaning in our living room prayers. After an initial period of adjustment, we found that davening alone, without the pressures of keeping up with a chazan, and without the distractions of people talking to our left and right, was rather uplifting. We have discovered a newfound beauty in slowly pronouncing the words of the siddur. We noticed powerful words and phrases in the davening and we

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have even taken a few moments to contemplate tefillot that we have raced through on thousands of occasions. We had moments, even if just a few, when we experienced tefillah as a

breath of fresh air at an overwhelming time, a relaxing and welcome break from life rather than a chore.

What awaits us when this terror comes to an end? Will we resume our close connection with the beit kneset, restoring *tefillah be-tzibbur* as a regular part of our lives? Or will we remain in the comfort of our homes, rationalizing that we pray more effectively at home anyway? Will communal tefillah resume with the many ills of pre-COVID services? Or will the break from shul allow us to reassess what our minyanim should be? When we again stand shoulder to shoulder in shul, will conversations pick up where they left off in March? Or will the six feet of distance we have maintained for the past year give us the perspective that we are physically in close proximity to our fellow worshippers, but each standing alone in the presence of the King?

We must rise, as individuals and communities, to the challenge of synthesizing the power and purpose of *tefillah be-tzibbur* with the meaning and beauty of personal tefillah. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reset our shul experiences, using the newness and excitement of a post-pandemic return to public life with the lessons learned from a year of private conversations with God.¹ Synagogues should spend time — now, as the pandemic rages on — thinking about how to recreate their minyanim to allow for greater religious expression and inspiration. Which parts of communal tefillah are the most uplifting? Which sections remain foreign to most worshippers and would benefit from further explanation? How long should the prayers last, and how much time

should be allotted to each component of the service? Are there ways to make people feel more comfortable in shul, to welcome those who, even before the pandemic, sensed barriers to their involvement? A diverse committee of shul members, guided by a rabbi who understands the meaning and laws of tefillah, can make critical changes to the synagogue experience.

But what can we do as individuals? How can we mold the shul experience to our own liking, most notably the slower pace and relaxed feeling that we have tasted at home? We can try to bring our “living room prayers” to the synagogue.

While the fast pace of the chazan at a shul minyan can't be ignored completely, there are ways to manage the challenge of a runaway minyan.

First, we can get to shul just a few minutes earlier. Much of the pressure to keep pace with the minyan can be alleviated by getting to shul on time, or even by starting just a few minutes earlier than the tzibbur. I'm not suggesting that we get to shul ten(!) minutes early. Simply that we arrive two to three minutes ahead of schedule. That commitment of a few minutes can radically change our experience.

Next, we can leave out some of the prayers. Yes — skip some of the davening. Of course, it is more appropriate to skip in tefillah if we have already done our part to arrive on time to shul and to start with the tzibbur. If we then fall behind, we can take the liberty to leave out sections of davening rather than force ourselves to mumble through whole sections of tefillah. As Rav Yosef Karo writes in the beginning of the *Shulchan Aruch*, “Better [a] few supplications with

concentration, than much without concentration.”

We are afraid to heed Rav Karo’s advice. We imagine, mistakenly, that he is speaking to someone who has trouble reading Hebrew, a novice *mitpallel*. We, who benefitted from a day-school education, must be among those who are obligated to say every word, *kavanah* notwithstanding.

Several years ago, Yeshiva invited a select group of 12th graders to see what YU had to offer. They participated in morning seder in the Glueck Beit Midrash and experienced, first-hand, the *kol Torah* of 500 young men studying Torah. They heard shiurim from the *gedolei Torah* that we call our *roshei yeshiva*. At the end of the day, they joined Rav Hershel Schachter and Rav Meyer Twersky, shlit”a, for a discussion about tefillah. What, they asked, could they do to improve their *kavanah*?

Rav Twersky, who insisted on speaking after Rav Schachter, explained that *kavanah* is a function of perception. If we are truly desperate for God’s help, we will have little trouble concentrating during the Amidah. He asked the young men to think of a time that they had davened a meaningful Shemoneh Esreh — even once. They were each brought back to a time of crisis, whether family-related, Israel-related or otherwise. When they felt a genuine need, they had no trouble turning to Hashem. Why then, do they struggle with everyday tefillah? Because we

all fail to understand the fragility of our day-to-day existence. We fail to realize that each and every day, we survive — and thrive — only because of Hashem’s care. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explained, it is for this reason that the Rambam counts daily tefillah as a Biblical obligation. Our daily supplication to the Ribbono shel Olam should alert us to our constant state of existential crisis.²

Rav Schachter, in his inimitable style, answered the student’s question in a much simpler way. “I skip a lot of tefillos. It’s not possible to keep up with the tzibbur and daven properly.” The boys were stunned. Unfamiliar with the Rosh Kollel, they couldn’t tell at first if he was joking. Rav Schachter, one of the *gedolei ha-dor*, doesn’t say every word? He explained that the long Tachanun said on Monday and Thursday — *ve-Hu Rachum* — is composed of three parts. He says one-third of the tefillah each time he recites the prayer.

Of course, he does more than just skip prayers. Rav Schachter arrives very early to the beit midrash so that he can say Pesukei de-Zimra in a proper way. However, when faced with a time crunch between the Amidah and the keriyat ha-Torah on Monday and Thursday, he opts to say less with *kavanah* rather than more without. We should feel comfortable to follow his lead.³

Finally, we can control the length of our private Amidah. Even if the minyan we join proceeds more

quickly than we would like, there is little reason to rush the centerpiece of our davening — the Shemoneh Esreh. Although there is much value in listening intently to *chazarat hashatz*, and one should refrain not just from talking, but even from learning Torah during the repetition of the Amidah, one need not cut their own Amidah short to participate in Kedushah or to answer amen to the chazan’s blessing.

Even if we cannot fully recreate the calm that we experienced during our living room prayer moments, we can decompress three times daily as we take our three steps forward to begin the Shemoneh Esreh. Before starting to speak, I try to drop my shoulders and take a deep breath. Without actually speaking, I reintroduce myself to my Maker, saying, “Hi, it’s Marc (I assume he still knows me by the name I grew up with!), checking in from [wherever I am davening that tefillah]. I’d like a moment to speak with you.” I wait, patiently, until the madness of my day has been pushed aside and I feel as if I’m standing alone with God. And then I start “*Adonai* — my master, *sefatai tiftach* — open my lips ...”

When I feel the tension of the world returning, and my mind starts wandering to the mundane issues I am facing, I stop to take another breath. I remind myself that my *hishtadlut*, my efforts, will not guarantee me success. In fact, I am standing before the One who can fulfill my needs and wishes. He has granted me an audience and is patiently listening to my requests. A



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sense of calm returns as I realize that I don't need to solve my problems alone. God is there to help.

If I am not rushing through my Amidah, I feel comfortable pausing to think about what I am saying. I can ask myself, "How does this particular berachah relate to me today? Is there something specific I should be adding to this request?" When I think of something I need, or, perhaps more importantly, something that another needs, I feel free to detour from the text and to reach out to God in my own words.

As Rabbi Yehuda ha-Levi explains in *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* (Book 3, section 5), the time of prayer can become the "fruit of our day," an island in a sea of life's challenges, and a time we look forward to — even crave — in the storm we call "life." This gift of tefillah can be found during the Amidah, even as we come back to shul.

Along with our efforts to enhance our tefillot in shul, we will need to remind ourselves, especially when it is burdensome to get to shul — a rainy Shabbat afternoon, a late night when we still need to daven Maariv — of the importance of coming to shul for *tefillah be-tzibbur*. For many months we have been told that God wanted us to stay home to guard our lives and the lives of our family members. I hope we have listened well to our poskim and will continue to put the mitzvah of "*venishmartem me'od le-nafshoteichem*" above other considerations. But when attending a minyan is safe, we must remind ourselves of the halachic obligation and the tremendous benefits of communal prayer.

Davening at home may, at times, be one's only option. But it presents an inherent difficulty. One of the primary purposes of prayer is to shake us from

the comfort of our surroundings and to expand our worldview.

When we gather with others to pray, we are reminded of the myriad needs of the community and the Jewish people as a whole. Even at home, we pray in the plural, asking God to care for others along with each one of us. Repetition, however, has desensitized us to this aspect of our tefillot. Encountering our friends and neighbors at minyan inevitably jars our memories and refocuses us on the problems faced by others. Moreover, the experience of praying with a minyan allows us to, once again, see ourselves as part of a larger entity, Klal Yisrael, and to pray more fervently for the fulfillment of the national goals of the Jewish people as expressed through the latter seven *bakashot* of the Amidah.

We are also uprooted from the comfort of "our space" and thrust into the four *amot* of God. Maharal (*Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Avodah*, chapter 5) explains that a journey to shul is rewarded with extraordinary "*sechar pesiyot*." Ordinarily, our travel is just a necessary step to performing a commandment in a different location. With tefillah, however, there is inherent value in venturing from our homes before commencing our rendezvous with God. The further we walk from our homes — even if we pass a closer shul on the way to minyan — the greater the sense that we have left our own space and entered that of our Creator. With every step — away from our home and toward the synagogue — we remind ourselves that we must pray not just for our personal needs, but to see the world from God's perspective, praying for His nation and the revelation of His holy Name.

Finally, we are forced at shul to listen to one another. As lofty as prayer may be, it consists primarily of something that we all *enjoy* doing — listening to ourselves talk. Public prayer asks us to remain silent as *someone else* takes the lead. Of course, many people talk or busy themselves with other activities as the chazan chants. By doing so, they display their discomfort with attending to the words of another. Aside from the halachic benefits of attaching ourselves to the *chazarat hashatz*, we learn self-control and sensitivity by having to listen to someone else.

We step out of our homes to encounter tefillah in its most lofty state. Surrounded not by the comforts of our personal space, but by the holiness of the shul, we become more spiritually attuned. Surrounded not just by our family, but by community members, we become more sensitive to the needs of others. Surrounded not just by quiet, but by the voice of a *shaliach tzibbur*, we must make room for another and join with others to petition Hashem.

A great opportunity lies before us: The chance to return to shul with a freshness and renewed excitement, coupled with the lessons of powerful prayer experiences at home. We must blend the muted melody of personal tefillah with the structured symphony of communal prayer to move closer to God than ever before.

ENDNOTES

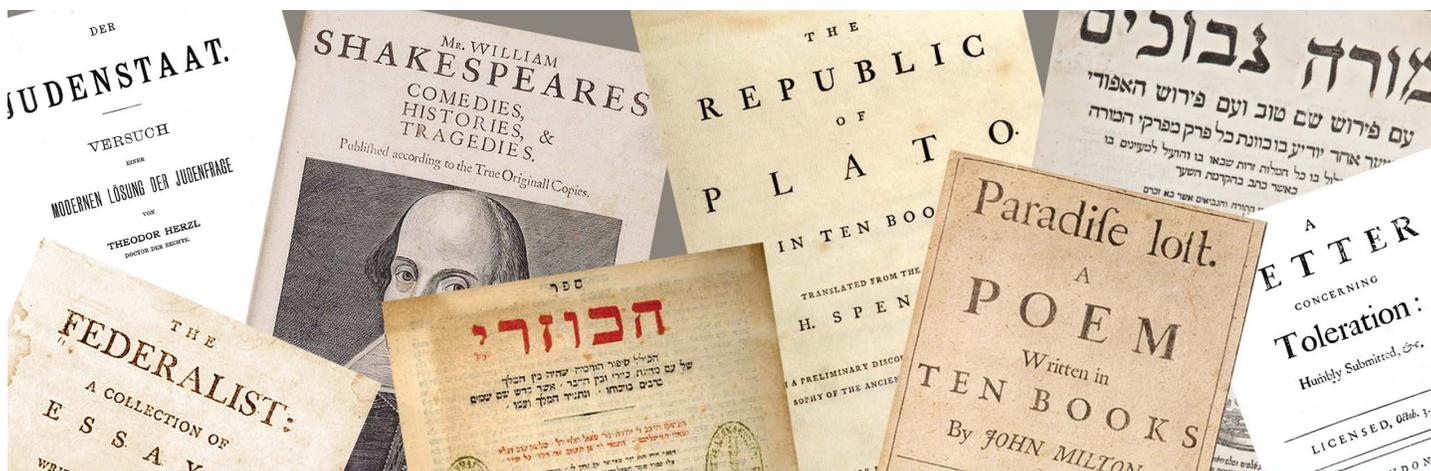
1. I, along with many of my rabbinic colleagues, are indebted to Rabbi Kalman Topp of Congregation Beth Jacob in Los Angeles, California, who stressed this point to many synagogue rabbis at a webinar sponsored by RIETS.
2. In a shiur delivered to the Rabbinical

Council of America in 1963, the Rav elucidated the famous disagreement between Rambam and Ramban as to whether there exists a Biblical obligation of daily prayer. Ramban, in his comments to Rambam's list of the 613 mitzvot, states that the Biblical mitzvah of prayer is brought about only at a time of crisis. When one we

feels an urgent need, their our faith must lead them us to petition Hashem. Rambam, disagrees, stating that there is a mitzvah to daven every day. Rabbi Soloveitchik argued that Rambam fundamentally agrees with Ramban — the commandment to pray is triggered by existential crisis. According to Rambam, however, the human condition

is one of never-ending crisis. The mitzvah to pray each day reminds us that we need God's constant support to navigate the perils of everyday existence.

3. Readers are encouraged to speak to their local rabbanim to best decide what to omit when needed.



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