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Where's God?: Educating Children for Tefillah Through Preparation, Prayer, and Questions

One *Shabbat* morning, a father and young child walked into synagogue together to begin praying. The father took out his *tallit* and *siddur* and handed a *siddur* to the child. Intending to guide the child as to how to begin, the father opened the child's *siddur* to the proper page and said, "Say *berakhot*." On the surface this seems like a reasonable and appropriate approach and directive. However, I believe it is an indicator of a larger spiritual problem that faces our community today – God is largely absent from our daily discussions, whether in synagogue, home, marketplace, or office, and the *siddur* has become the goal rather than a tool with which to form communal and personal communication with God through *tefillah*. Indeed, how many of us ask our children as they begin praying to "Thank God," or to "Praise God," or to "Ask God for x, y, or z?" Rather, we ask them to "Say *berakhot*." "Did you talk to God?" should be a common question we ask our children. I do not believe that this is just semantics. It is making the communication, the relationship, and the purpose primary and the mechanics secondary. Often we reverse the priorities in practice, whether in our homes or in our schools. God is absent.

Ironically, this is not the case for everyone. Have you ever noticed that famous people, especially athletes, thank God often? Here are a few examples of athletes:

Mariano Rivera – the great Yankee pitcher about his recovery from his knee injury: "I take it day by day. I'm working hard and doing what I do.... That's the way I'm thinking, day by day and positive, definitely. Optimism, positive. *Whatever the Lord will allow to happen, will happen.*"

Reggie White – the retired football great: "*God places the heaviest burden on those who can carry its weight.*"

Tim Tebow – the football quarterback: "I have so many things to work on, and so many ways that I fail. But that's what grace is all about and I constantly wake up every morning trying to get better, trying to improve, *trying to walk closer to God.*"

Cam Newton – also a football quarterback, during his Heisman acceptance speech: "I first want to give all the *honor and glory to God* who is the head of my life."

LeBron James – the basketball player: "I thank *God for the God-given talent* He gave me."

Other notables also have expressed faith publicly:

Albert Einstein about what motivates him: "I want to know how *God created this world*. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know *His thoughts*; the rest are details."

Benjamin Franklin: "Beer is proof that *God loves us and wants us to be happy.*"

Many celebrities express their faith not only in word but with public action too – crossing themselves or pointing to heaven when they touch home plate after hitting a home run or kneeling on one knee in the end zone after scoring a touchdown.

But in our homes and in our public arenas, we are often uncomfortable with any public expression of faith. In my home growing up, anytime an athlete mentioned God after winning a game or an actor invoked God's name when winning an award, my parents grimaced – this was deemed inappropriate. When our children return home from further Torah study, whether in Israel or in college, invoking God's name publicly (e.g., citing God as a part of your life or saying "*Barukh Hashem*") it is viewed as an indicator of "flipping out" rather than viewed as a natural expression of faith. Yet, when our children are younger we wonder why so many of them are disengaged.

In part, I believe the answer is that we need to focus on our own relationship with God, our own expressions of belief, and our own experiences with *tefillah*, including our challenges with all three.

Is our relationship with God merely transactional like the one we have with the check-out person in a store? Alternatively, is our relationship with God more like that of a parent, a *melekh* (king), or other meaningful bond? Do

we at least aspire for such a relationship? To what extent do we make God a priority in our lives and the lives of our children? What priority do we place on nurturing not only the minds of our children in learning, and our children's bodies in various sports and other activities, but also their *neshamot* (souls)?

Perhaps this is a priority for us but that we struggle with implementation. How do we explicitly and implicitly convey this value?

PREPARATION

While few if any fulfill the aspiration of the *Gemara* (*Berakhot* 32b) for people to prepare for *tefillah* for one hour prior to davening, realistically few people prepare even minimally. Of those who attend *minyanim*, already a fraction of Jews, how many find themselves running in for *Minchah* at the last minute? The scene outside many synagogues immediately before a *minyan* has screeching cars pulling into parking places, people bumping into each other, and crowds standing in the back of the room having come in at the last minute or late. In schools, our children are expected to "turn on the spiritual" as the bell rings indicating it is time for *Minchah*, -scheduled between two classes. Unfortunately, preparation for *tefillah* doesn't fit into the already full program. Few take their cell phone out of their pocket or off their hip when entering shul or when we start our conversation with God during the *Amidah*. Do we make the time for God in our hectic lives in demonstrable ways or do children see that we do so when it is convenient?

Without proper preparation for physical activity, physical injuries may occur. What about preparation for spiritual activities? Do spiritual injuries affect us? Who knows what happens to the soul when we do not prepare for an encounter with God? If the process of recovery for a physical injury includes slowing down, doing less, and working back to normal play through practice and exercise, what does the prescription for a spiritual injury entail? If we "warm up" for exercise, how do we "warm up" for speaking with God?

We need to find the time to prepare for *tefillah* for ourselves and as a model for our children and/or the children in our community. Do you use the walk to synagogue to prepare yourself and/or to speak with your child(ren) about encountering God? Do you ever speak with your children about God? Here are some questions that might be part of such a conversation. You could first share your own answers with your children and then see if your child feels comfortable answering any of them with you.

Have you thought about God today?

Have you spoken with God today?

Where have you encountered and experienced God?

Did you ever have a spiritual moment in your life? (For this one, the conversation might entail discussing the answer to that question by a parent, grandparent, sibling, friend, rabbi, or someone else in the life of the child.)

Discuss the connectors to God and the disconnectors.

Discussing your needs

- What do you need?
- What are the needs of those closest to you?

Discuss gratitude

- What are you grateful for?
- What difficult moments in your life are you most grateful for?
- What moments in your life are you most proud of?

PRAYER

Beyond preparation, we must focus on prayer as an experience itself. However, for ourselves and our children we must acknowledge that davening is difficult. Do you speak with your children about how hard it is for you to connect to God through davening, the times you struggle with it? It has been said that R. Yehuda Amital, the late *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, would say that he aspired to connect with God one time per year but davened three times a day because he did not know when that one time would be. Likewise the following passage from the *Yerushalmi* (*Berakhot* 2:5) delineates how difficult *tefillah* can be:

R. Chiya said: "I never concentrated during prayer in all my days. Once I wanted to concentrate, but I thought about who will meet the king first: the *Arkavsa* [a Persian high official] or the Exilarch?"

Shmuel said, "I count clouds [during prayer]."

R. Bun bar Chiyah said, "I count the layers of stones in the wall [while I pray]."

R. Masnaya said "I am grateful to my head, because it bows by itself when I reach *Modim*."

Prayer is hard. Engaging with difficult efforts is not necessarily enjoyable. We must not expect *tefillah* to just come easy for our children or that they will enjoy it, especially for long periods of time. Proactively moderate the experience for your children so that they participate for the right amount of time for them and remain motivated to engage more. And remember that this is about them – don't take their participation (or lack of participation) as a reflection on you, a social indicator in comparison to your peers. "Keeping up with the Joneses" (or Schwartzes) has no place in the education of our children, including their religious and spiritual development.

QUESTIONS

Asking questions about God and religion is healthy and not a sign of rebellion. Of course, asking questions is best within the context of a relationship. It isn't necessarily a bad sign when a child is fighting with his or her parents. It is a problematic when there is no communication – positive or negative – at all. No discussion, no argument, no -engagement indicates a problem. So too with regard to our relationship with God. R. Shlomo Wolbe (a great Jerusalem-based spiritual guide of the last generation) is reported to have said, "[T]here is no such thing as a heretical question, only a heretical answer."

Parents should encourage questions from their children about God, belief, practice, and prayer. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know. But I'm interested in exploring that with you. Who would you like to speak with about that?" Here we are speaking about skepticism not cynicism. We aren't speaking about modeling or encouraging complaining or expressing annoyance with experiencing religion like grouching about the restrictions of *Shabbat*, the aggravation of a "three-day *yom tov*," or the difficulties of keeping kosher in the workplace, all of which only breeds a negative outlook. Rather, parents should encourage the questions about these issues so that their children understand *what* and *why* we do what we do and gain clarity about our priorities and values. How unfortunate it is that kids see parents leave work early to make the first pitch of a 7:05 pm baseball game, but not to go *Minchah/Ma'ariv*; rush to be on time for a movie or play, but not to make it to davening before it begins. All of this can easily lead to a cynical disposition and kids' concern over perceived (or potentially real) hypocrisy.

Judaism is built on skepticism and questioning in our learning and in our living, but cynicism must be eradicated. As we embrace our own skepticism, our children need us to be open to theirs. A spiritual leader of a school once quipped, "[I]f you haven't contemplated Atheism, then it is difficult to believe in God."

We need to provide opportunities for our children to *prepare* for encounters with God, understand the difficulties of *prayer* – make it a meaningful positive experience with God – not only a mechanical reading of a prayer book, and embrace the *questions* – avoiding cynicism but engaging skepticism. Focusing on these aspects of our own lives will model for our children healthy dispositions and provide a framework for their own religious and spiritual lives. In this way, the *siddur* and *tefillah* become tools with which to bring God into our homes, our schools, our synagogues, and the minds, hearts, and souls of the next generation.

Essays on Specific Prayers