

Making Requests of God
Kol Nidre 5775, Rabbi Justus Baird

Dear Rabbi,

My husband has been living with me in my house not according to the proper way, but in great strife he walks the improper path, and constantly plays cards and does other profane things that are not pious. And I cannot suffer this. And because of this he beat me. And now, since he has mingled with the Gentile [soldiers], he has learned their ways and does not want to live with me when he returns from his work. May our Teacher and Rabbi pray to our fathers in Heaven to turn his heart to good, or to arrange a proper divorce.

Feigel bat Hadas wrote these words to Rabbi Elijah Guttmacher, the Tzaddik of Gratz, now in Poland, sometime in the late 1860's. Her note is among a collection of 5,000 petitions sent by everyday eastern European Jews to Rabbi Guttmacher. Scholars call these petitions *kvitlekh*.

The story behind the petitions is a good one – but a bit too long for including in this sermon. Suffice it to say that the petitions

- were discovered in an attic in Poland in 1932,
- brought to the YIVO institute in Vilna,
- taken to Frankfurt by the Nazi Institute for Investigating the Jewish Question,
- and then brought to New York by the US Army to where the YIVO institute had relocated.

One of my favorite petitions in the collection is written by the owner of a bar, who is deeply angry about the competition for customers that started when a Gentile opened another tavern nearby:

Dear Rabbi,

[Please pray] for success in the tavern, and to repel the local Gentile who arose against the Jews and took their livelihood, so that the customers will not go to him, and [that] the scent of his drinks will stink so they can no longer bear his drinks. And to cause his downfall, for all the Jews and the widows and the orphans need it, for he took their livelihood.

As I read these petitions, I thought to myself, would I make such a request of God today? Am I willing to pour out my heart to God in this way, asking for divine help?

The Jews who sent petitions to Rabbi Guttmacher asked for help in finding a match, and for earning a living, avoiding the fate of conscription into the Russian army, and all kinds of

other requests. But today, about the only thing I hear Jews asking for with that much earnestness is healing and health. We are eager to add a name to our community's misheberach list, but what about the many other unmet needs and desires in our hearts?

Will the prayers that rise from this room include such heartfelt requests as well? Maybe a request to find a job? Or to get a date with someone special? Or for a child to make a wise choice? Or to help with infertility problems? Or for a business or product to take off? Or for a solution to a demoralizing financial problem?

What would happen if, during the silent Amidah, the traditional moment in prayer the rabbis gave us to pour out our hearts to God, instead of racing through the words on the page, instead of sitting down quickly, we took the time to reflect on what we need and want, we took the time to uncover our unfulfilled desires, and then allowed those requests to leap from our hearts and out of our mouths so that an angel could bring them to God?

Leonard Felder, a psychologist and author of books on Jewish spirituality, describes the problem this way:

I have found from interviewing thousands of men and women from all branches of Judaism that, for the majority of Jews, Jewishness consists of shared history, ethnic food, compassionate values, and feelings about Israel. Only a small percentage still pour out their hearts each day like Moses or Tevye or your great grandmother did when they constantly argued and confided with God about the problems they faced. Most Jews today have tried many more flavored varieties of bagels than their ancestors did, but they have stopped conversing with God.

I myself have had serious struggles with talking to, and making requests of God. In my last year of rabbinical school, I realized that I had no willingness to engage in daily personal prayer. I knew from others that it could be very meaningful, but I just couldn't do it. After a few months of reflection, and some goading by a faculty member who served as my spiritual director, I tried an experiment. The experiment was to write my own siddur. 90% of my siddur was the traditional liturgy, but for the 10% of the prayers that I just could not connect to, I re-wrote them. When I was done, I found that daily prayer became a joy. I was able to find my voice and talk to God much more easily. I still use that siddur today for personal prayer.

For me, an inability to connect with parts of the prayer book was blocking my relationship with God. But there are many good reasons for why we don't talk to God anymore. Dr. Felder writes:

One of my clients told me, "I stopped praying after my wife and I lost an infant child. Our prayers seemed to be unanswered." /

And a close friend who is the daughter of a Holocaust survivor told me, "I stopped asking God for help when I was a teenager and I heard my father tell me about the cruelty and randomness he experienced in the camps. /

An Israeli client stopped praying when she lost her nephew to a suicide bombing. "I no longer talk to God," she said. "I'm angry at God." /

Another client...[who grew up] during the politically-charged 1960s and 1970s...told me, "We grew up with a devotion to repairing the world, but we weren't going to wait for God to help."

These are the reasons some of us do not Ask God for thing: a tragic death, the absence of God in the Holocaust, a belief that if we wait for God to fix the broken things in the world, we will be waiting a really long time.

I'll add one more reason: strong social and cultural pressures against make requests of God. If any of you were fans of the rock band The Doors back in the day, or remember the summer of 1969, you may recall a song titled "Soft Parade." It opens with lead singer Jim Morrison speaking like a fiery preacher:

When I was back there in seminary school
There was a person there
Who put forth the proposition
That you can petition the Lord with prayer
Petition the lord with prayer (x2)
You cannot petition the lord with prayer!

As much as I love his music, I believe Jim Morrison got this one wrong. Because the only thing worse than not getting what we want, is never even *asking* for what we want.

Because ASKING is the first step to GETTING. It may indeed be that simple. Whether it is something for ourselves or something for someone else, if we don't ask, we are much less likely to get. Most of life is lived in the gap between the ask and the resolution – most of life is in the pursuit of fulfilling the request. But first we have to make the Ask.

Rabbi Daniel Landes from Pardes teaches that making petitions to God has ethical consequences. He writes, "Since we ask God to do these things, it must be in God's nature to do them; and since we are made in God's image, it must be in our nature also to do them, when we act in a Godly way."¹

Prayer is turned from a moment of vulnerability into a call for action.

I do NOT know what God does with all our prayers. But I DO know that if we don't reflect on what we need, and then make the ask, we're a lot less likely to get it.

¹ Opening essay in Hoffman commentary to Amidah.

Just before Rosh Hashanah Rabbi Roth and I were on a date night, and we were discussing this sermon – because when two rabbis are married to each other and go out before the high holidays, that is what passes for conversation. And my wife asked me what I would be asking God for this year.

Here's my answer. This year I will be asking God for success in a major new leadership program I am leading at Auburn Seminary. Inspired by the recent People's Climate March, I will also ask God to trigger more action around climate change. And I will be asking God to help me become a better husband, to find ways to reserve some of my best energy for my marriage, because too often I spend all my best energy on my work and our kids.

And so I ask you the same question Rabbi Roth asked me, "What will you be asking God for this year?"

Will you be inspired by the Israelites – our ancestors who struggled with God – who cried out for help even after generations of bondage? And by Moses who cried out to God so many times? And by Hannah who cried out to God for a son, as we read on Rosh Hashanah?

Will you be inspired by the prayer of Feigel bat Hadas, who asked God to turn her husband's heart or to help her get a divorce? Or by Menachem Moses ben Feiga who had the hutzpah to ask God to make his competitors drinks stink so he could have his livelihood back?

During the high holidays we tend to focus on asking for forgiveness. But research shows that when we are on our deathbeds, two-thirds of us will not regret things that we did wrong. We will regret things we didn't do.

Shouldn't we spend at least as much time during the *yamim noraim*, these days of Awe, reflecting on what we have not yet done, and on what we want and need for ourselves and for the world, shouldn't we spend at least as much time reflecting on those things as we do thinking about whom we have wronged?

The rabbis gave us these holidays for introspection. Let us reflect on the requests we have not yet made. And then, let us ask.

Because the only thing worse than not getting what we want, is never even asking for what we want. B'A'A, *shomea tefilah*. Blessed are You Adonai, who hears our prayer.