

Shoftim

August 18, 2018

## **Shabbat Shalom**

It's often said that the **definition of insanity** is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

My successive trips to the refrigerator looking for the same craving reducing snack that is simply not there or repeatedly buying a lottery ticket hoping to win \$250 million or playing basketball against my son expecting to win are evidence of such insanity,

I found a quote from a 1955 book "The Psychology of Personal Constructs" addressing this phenomenon from a different perspective.

**"From the standpoint of the psychology of personal constructs **we may define a disorder as any personal construction which is used repeatedly in spite of consistent invalidation.**"**

We continue doing the same thing hoping fervently that the result will be different and we don't change when facing the same, disappointing outcomes.

More and more, I find myself in this infinite loop of continually doing without validated positive feedback when I arrive at the parts of our weekday prayers that are petitionary. When I ask God for things, be they communally or personally oriented, I frequently say to myself: “This is INSANE”! I see no evidence these prayers are answered but I pray anyway. What’s up with that?

Most of prayer can be thematically related to three key elements: praise of God, thanks/appreciation for what God has given to us, requests of God for things we think we need or want.

So I think and ponder, mull and muse... How am I going to find relevance in these prayers of petition?

I invite you now to travel with me on a bit of a circuitous process that I have used to try to answer this question for myself. **Is asking God for anything insane** by this definition?

In today’s parashah, we read the famous line:

[צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּף](#)

It means, “Justice, Justice, you will pursue.” If you have come this morning to hear me expound on the virtues of justice, sorry to disappoint you! The word TIRDOF is another matter. It means to be behind, to follow after, to pursue, to run. The pursuit

is active and purposeful. So, in this spirit, join me in my personal pursuit as I try to resolve for myself:

### **Is praying to God for things insanity or therapy?**

The **first stop** in this journey: What am I actually asking God for? Here are some examples from our fixed prayer in the weekday shacharit:

In our morning blessings, I ask God to help me tame my Yetzer HaRa (my inclination to be selfish, even evil) and strengthen my Yetzer HaTov (my inclination to be selfless, even altruistic).

I seek protection from insolence or arrogance in others and from becoming insolent or arrogant myself; I ask God to smash foes and enemies of mine and of the Jewish community.

Before the Sh'Ma, I ask for L'HaVeen U'l'haskeel: understanding and discernment ... the tools needed to navigate the world including those needed to pursue a life guided by Torah.

Then, I long for the following world:

A world in which people are introspective and focused on self-improvement; one in which people seek forgiveness for doing wrong and, because of that sincerity, earn pardon and forgiveness. A world free of adversity and suffering, filled with good health, material well-being and supportive communities. A world free of enemies wishing our destruction and one where the upright and just are sustained and rewarded. A world in which people listen to each other and respond with empathy and love. A world where people recognize that they benefit from so much of existence they had nothing to do with creating and are motivated by that appreciation to be good caretakers of all, even what is not theirs. And, if all that was not enough, imagine a world of peaceful coexistence, where individuals and communities are filled with happiness, contentment, mutual support and that this blissful state lasts forever!

Lyrics from a John Lennon song? Hardly. Our weekday Amidah. Granted, I have taken some interpretive license... But I pray for this very world every time I pray. And when I am done, I often feel I have prayed for an unattainable world, one I can't see from a macro level and one with innumerable obstacles and challenges to even approximate this ideal. And yet I continue to pray expecting different results! Insanity.

**The second step on this pursuit is to ask: Does God Listen?**

I have no earthly idea!! So, as I will in other stops on this journey, I will try to answer through **inference** (note, my spell checker thought I wrote **irreverence**... maybe one and the same in this case!)

In the Amidah, after all of the requests I just summarized, comes the paragraph that starts Sh'mah Koleinu...

*Hear our voice, Adonai our God. Have compassion upon us, pity us. Accept our prayer with loving favor. Kee Ayl Sho-may-ah t'filot v'ta-cha-noo-neem... You listen to entreaty and prayer. Do not turn us away unanswered, our Sovereign, for You mercifully heed Your people's supplication. Praised are you Adonai, sho-may-ah t'fillah... who listens to prayer.*

So, a listening God is an article of faith. In some ways, it is a bedrock of faith for praying to a non-listening God is surely insanity. I'm unwilling to bet against a listening God even though I can't prove to myself definitively that God actually listens. What I'm really saying is that I am not willing to bet that there is no God at all.

### **The third stop: Does God Answer?**

An Orthodox writer, [J. Immanuel Schochet](#), quotes the Baal Shem Tov:

*Every single prayer is effective and answered, though not necessarily on the level of the petitioner.*

*In the words of the Baal Shem Tov:*

*One must believe that as soon as the prayer has been uttered, one is answered for what has been requested. It may be asked, that at times the fulfillment of the request is not perceived. In fact, however, (the prayer has been answered, except that) it is in a manner hidden from the petitioner.*

*For example, one may have prayed specifically for the removal of his distress, and this request was granted in terms of the world in general. (The petitioner's personal anguish may remain, but) that itself is actually for his own good, or to expiate some sin, and the like.*

Apparently, God's plan is not evident to my simple, human mind. The reasons for the workings of the universe are clearly hidden from me as assuredly as they are good for me. Who knew? Perhaps I did not deserve the answer I was seeking? Perhaps my request merited no answer.

UGH... I can understand why we fall back on these explanations of the unknowable but I reject this answer and must continue on my journey. What chutzpah: The brilliant Baal Sham Tov on one side, the honest skepticism of David Ezekiel on the other.

BUT... let's play along for a minute. It indeed may be fair to ask the hard questions that the Baal Shem Tov alludes to.

The **fourth** stop: **Which requests are, in fact, worthy? Do I really need what I ask for?**

**Here, I return to inference and, likely, irreverence!**

In Pirkei Avot, Ben Zoma teaches:

Who is the rich one? He who is happy with his lot, as it says, "When you eat [from] the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you" (Psalm 128)

There is an interesting play on words. He who is content with what he, himself, has is happy. It is also taught that he who is happy with his (the other guy's) lot is also content. Meaning, no envy.

The fifteenth century Talmudist, Yitzhak ben Moshe Arama wrote in his Akedat Yitzchak:

*To the extent that material possessions free man from being totally preoccupied with his physical survival in this world, they afford him the opportunity to try and acquire spiritual values. To this extent, material wealth can almost be considered a necessity.*

You may ask, how much wealth is enough to live on, thus freeing us to pursue higher purposes?

Maimonides's Mishneh Torah answers:

*It is necessary for man to set his heart and all his efforts solely to know the Name, blessed is He! So that his sitting down, his rising up and his speech shall be facing this goal. How may he accomplish it? When he will buy, or sell, or do work for wages, he should not have in his heart the accumulation of money only but he should perform these duties as a means to acquire the necessities of the body, as food, drink, dwelling-place and marriage; likewise when he will eat, drink, or lead a family life, he should not set his heart upon these things for the sole enjoyment thereof...*

*...For, lo, it is impossible that one should understand or know aught of the divine knowledge concerning the Creator when he is sick, it is necessary for man to distance himself from things which destroy the body, and accustom himself in things which are healthful and life-imparting.*

The tradition gives us an honest way to assess how appropriate or not our requests of God are. Using this prism, are my prayers of petitions, not only the communal ones but also (maybe, especially) the personal ones, worthy of a response from God?

By the above definition, all of my first world problems appear unworthy... Up until today, I have a great marriage, three wonderful and healthy children striving to

make a difference in the world guided, in part, by Jewish values, a business that has more than supported my family, my parents and some of the best employees anyone could ever have. I have a father who has begun his 90<sup>th</sup> year in good health, extended family doing well. I eat clearly more than I should, have a home that has sheltered and nurtured my family for nearly 30 years. I do not take much vacation but our vacations are nearly always wonderful, relaxing, exciting and family-centric.

So, you may rightly ask, what the heck do I pray for? Again, what chutzpah must I have to ask for anything more than what I need or more than what I have?

**And, by the way, what right do I have to ask anyway?**

Every time I pray I say to God: Praised are You Adonai our God , who rules the universe, She'asa Lee Kol Tzorkkee... providing for all my needs;

Again from Ashrei:

Adonai supports all who stumble, and uplifts all who are bowed down.

Potay-ach et yadecha... You open your hand, your favor supports all the living

Adonai is just in all His ways, loving in all his deeds.

At the same time I am asking for things big and small, worthy or not, I am reminded emphatically that I get up in a reliable physical shelter, put on my clothes, eat, go to work and earn a living.... And, I have a safety net none other than God himself. In fact, per tradition, God has already given me all I need in His wisdom and mercy.

If my petitionary prayers haven't been answered, then, could it be that I have been praying for the wrong things?

Or, if it is the case that I am asking for meritorious things, then could it be possible that I, myself, am not worthy of the desired response? As we have been taught many times, the Hebrew word meaning "TO PRAY" is L'HITPALEL". It is a reflexive verb, traditionally defined as a process of *self*-evaluation, *self*-judgment... Thus prayer is for us to improve and to understand ourselves. I read an interesting related definition: the meaning of התפלל is **to make oneself the object of God's פלל (assessment, intervention, or judging)**. The act of praying, then, lays bare our entire beings for an honest assessment by both God and ourselves.

### **Therefore, the fifth stop: Who Merits a response?**

Here, our tefillot seem fairly unambiguous while, at the same time, setting, for me, a nearly impossible, unattainable goal.

In Ashrei, we profess: *Adonai is near (KAROV) to all who call, to all who call with integrity (EMET: truth, sincerity, unmasked...)*

*God fulfills the desire of those who are faithful; God hears their cry and delivers them.*

In the second paragraph of the the Sh'Ma, V'Haya Im Shamo'ah- *If you will earnestly heed the mitzvot I give you this day, to love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will favor your land with rain at the proper season... You will eat to contentment....*

Just as my requests seem to fail the worthiness test (at least, the personal ones), this bar of what is required to get a response from God seems, for me, also wholly unattainable. I do not have perfect faith. I am not always sincere in my efforts to become closer to God. I simply do not always give my whole self to the pursuit of God's mitzvot. Then of course, for me, it is insane to even ask.

Yet, I reject the notion that God expects perfection in intent or behavior because that would be insanity on His part! He would be continually giving us the opportunity to meet His expectations and He would continually be disappointed. But He keeps giving us the eternal chance to be worthy (individually and communally), whatever that means. So, I contradict myself: I guess both God and I are insane.

**So, how to synthesize all of this?**

We are in the period of time between Tisha' B'Av and Rosh Hashanah... we have been on an emotional roller coaster going from the depths of despair to the heights of hope as the new year approaches.

While I have begun with a fairly gloomy thesis that praying for things, material and otherwise - asking God for things - is, for me, utter insanity when I have **no idea** if my prayers are or will be answered, if my requests of God have merit or not, if I am worthy of the desired response, or not, or, in fact, if God even listens to me, I want to end at that sixth, and final, stop on my journey with what I hope is a more upbeat message.

**Stop Six: I continue to pray and have no intention of quitting. And, as insane as it may seem, I will continue asking for things for myself and my world even when I have no evidence my requests are worthy, heard or answered. Here's why.**

Tefilot are the greatest repository of Jewish values we have. I will continue to pray to stay grounded in those values, to stay pointed in the right direction for my life.

To remind myself that I will never have all that I want, personally or in my world.

To work every day at being content with your lot AND my lot... which, so far, is pretty darned good.

To remind myself to try to bring about the things I want and what others need and want. Why wait for God? He gave me the gifts to create in this world, in the here and now. I remember that I am obliged to use those gifts for good whenever I can.

To remember that I do not need to be God, or Moses, or Gandhi, or Martin Luther King Jr... but to make my corner of the world a better place through actions; I can't be God but I can choose to imitate what I think is the ideal which God represents.

To stay motivated; To affirm that the path I have chosen is enduring and still right for me and that I have the ability to create good within my world with what I have and that, in fact, I actually may not need what I am lacking or what I want in order to fulfill that humble mission.

To remember that I need to listen to the things people need from me... with compassion, understanding, patience... and to try to respond where my abilities allow. And NOT to beat myself up over my limitations .

To force myself to ask: Am I asking for something I really need? Would I be better off using that energy to improve myself or the world around me?

To be grateful : Modim Anachnu Lach is for me, the most important prayer..

Because after we pour out our hearts asking for things we want, we compel ourselves to be grateful for what we do have – especially for what we can't provide for ourselves but from which we benefit daily.

To make myself better. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says:

*Prayer is not about being answered or not. Through sincere prayer, "We begin to see the beauty of the created world.... Slowly, we come to think less of the "I, more of the "WE;" less of what we lack than of what we have; less of what we need from the world, more of **what** the world needs from us. Prayer is **less** about getting what we want than about learning what to want... We earn the deep happiness that comes from learning to give praise and thanks. **The world we build tomorrow is born in the prayers we say today.**"*

Thus, while I remain reasonably skeptical, I maintain that the pursuit of the reasons to pray, the relevance of prayer (petitionary and not) to our modern lives has never been more urgent for me, as I hope it is for all of us. This pursuit is necessary, affirming, energizing, educational and vital. You could even say, therapeutic.

And, at the seventh stop, I will rest...

Shabbat Shalom