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How Can Reconstructionists Pray?



Article

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Reconstructionists are not atheists. The founder of Reconstructionism, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, was falsely accused of atheism during his lifetime and has been so labeled since his death. Those accusations are made by people who think that either you believe in a God who governs the details of our lives, rewarding and punishing us, orchestrating the things that happen or you don't believe in God at all.

Most Reconstructionists reject that attempt to define our beliefs, because it does not correspond with our experience. On good days, my life is permeated with God's presence. I open my eyes in the morning and am in awe of the light of the morning sun. Kissing my wife and children goodbye, I am overcome with the way our very imperfect family generates love and joy among us. Solving a difficult challenge on the job, I take a breath and notice the constructive, healing processes I have harnessed.

I don't believe that God decided to cause the sun to rise this morning. I don't believe God watches over my children and makes them mature. I don't believe God solves my work problems. But I do believe I live in a world that God underlies and suffuses. I do believe that I do

not generate my virtuous deeds and insights independently, but rather am connected to a greater Source of strength and blessing with whom I am always trying to align. I believe some things are right and some things are wrong, and I believe that when you do the wrong thing you are opposing the divine will and that the world is so constructed that you will suffer for it internally.

Not all Reconstructionists share each of these specific beliefs. What we do share is a conviction that a) the words of the Torah, and consequently the *mitzvot* (including those about prayer) were not literally spoken and commanded by God at Sinai, and b) that nevertheless our inherited traditions, including the *siddur* (prayer book), are an invaluable treasure that can help us to unfold the deeper meanings of our lives and our relationship to God.

In other words, if I had brought a tape recorder to Mount Sinai, I believe there would have been no audible divine voice to record; only the human side of the conversation was recordable. But I believe that God was at Sinai, encountered by Moses, so that even though the words of the Torah are Moses human interpretation of God's will, they are inspired by that encounter and contain divine insight.

And so with every divine-human encounter up to the present day: What we hear and understand of God is necessarily conditioned by who we are, by where and when we live, by our culture's values, by our individual propensities. We are the flawed filters through which the word of God is conveyed. Therefore, we Reconstructionists don't believe that everything that preceding generations said about God and about what God wants is true. But we do believe in a God who is beyond all of the historically conditioned human portraits of God. And we seek to express our intuitions of God in ways that both correspond to the teachings we inherit and that are compelling in the cultural idiom of our day.

There are three primary ways that Jews have pictured God at work in our lives - as the God of Creation, the God of Revelation, and the God of Redemption. Each of these can still serve us well as we seek to give words to our encounters with God.

Creation

God is the Source of the universe. God is therefore met in the laws and cycles of nature, in the expanse of the galaxies, in the miracle of life. Even as scientists explore quarks and black holes, new facets of DNA and new evidence about evolution, we are aware that we will never comprehend it all. But when we catch the breeze on a sunny spring day or watch a toddler take her first step, we get a glimpse of the ineffable oneness underlying it all.

Revelation

God is the Source of our spiritual and moral passion. The human species may or may not be the crown of creation, but there is definitely a connection between our minds and souls and the divinely infused world out there. It is as if God's word overflows perpetually, embedded in the color of the sky and the behavior of groups, in test tubes and mathematical formulas, waiting for us to open to its message and interpret it for our lives and time. The more open we are, the more we hear.

Redemption

God is the source of all our tendencies to help and love and cooperate. It is easy enough for each of us to remain self-centered, not to care about others, to regard others as Other and therefore not worthy of our kindness. Human history documents the prevalence of these tendencies. But there is a divine spark in each of us that can be nurtured, a source of goodness and caring that can move us to act on principle, to do what is right even if it is not in our own best interest in the short term. It enables us to envision a redeemed world so that we can work towards that vision.

The kabbalists seized and expanded upon the rabbinic assertion that we are partners with God in the work of creation. They pictured this world as having been created imperfect by God, who then needs us to release the divine sparks hidden within it.

Here, then, is a non-exhaustive list of why a Reconstructionist Jew, who does not believe that God hears our prayers or answers our petitions, might choose to pray:

Spiritual Discipline

Most of us go through the day without experiencing God's presence. A spiritual sense is a faculty that must be developed and maintained. Focusing regularly on our sacred encounters helps us to notice them as they occur.

Meditation

Most of us live at a very rapid pace. We welcome the opportunity to slow down to remember what has deeper meaning beyond our daily distractions.

Group Connection

If we are not careful, it is pretty easy to become isolated. Even if we interact frequently with others, our daily lives rarely afford many opportunities to let our guards down and express what is really important to us. It is a real treat to be connected to a group, all of whom are seeking together.

Celebration

For many of us, group singing transports us beyond ourselves. I may be awash in gratitude for a life-cycle passage, or for the blossoming of flowers in my yard, but without my *minyan* (prayer quorum), where could I sing out?

Group Support

Life is unfortunately filled with disappointment, illness, tragedy. Social scientists now tell us what we already knew: that recovery from family discord, depression, and even physical illness is enhanced when we experience the support of a caring group. You therefore might believe that

praying for a sick person is efficacious even if you don't believe that God intercedes supernaturally. Our prayers have power.

Rededication to Principles

Most of us are raised to think that we have control of our lives, and that therefore we are responsible for what happens to us good and bad. In truth, we have far less control than we think, and it is good to acknowledge our vulnerability. Prayer allows us to ask for help, to admit that we need help, that we are frightened or overwhelmed or desperate. Removing our defenses before God can move us to the honest self-awareness we require to get past our personal obstacles.

The rabbis engaged in interesting discussions about the relationship in prayer between *kevah* (fixed prayers, the words of which are provided in the siddur) and *kavanah* (spontaneous reflections by the one praying). They understood that mindless recitation of words written by others was not prayer. But they also understood that without a prepared format to induce us to pray, most of us would rarely achieve a prayerful state.

The traditional prayers in the siddur are thus intended as a format to assist us in getting in touch with our own personal prayers. In my own experience, it was the regular recitation of the *Modim* (thanks) section of the *Amidah* (standing prayer) that first enabled me, after six months, to become regularly connected with my feelings of thankfulness. I then went on to other parts of the fixed service until the entire fixed service has become a set of mnemonics that jump-start me in an ever-new variety of meditations.

But isn't the traditional service, even in the new Reconstructionist siddur, laden with anthropomorphic supernatural language that presents a challenge to our intellectual integrity and thus an obstacle to genuine prayer? The answer for many people is yes — unless and until we reinterpret the meaning of images so often that we reach a point at which we read them with new meanings without need to reinterpret consciously any longer. Here are two illustrations:

Modim

In every Amidah, we davven the Modim paragraph, a prayer of thanksgiving in which we say:

We acknowledge you, declare your praise, and thank you ... for your miracles that greet us every day, and for your wonders and good things that are with us every hour.

Now, the words *nisekha* (your miracles) and *nifla'otekha* (your wonders) are terms that have traditionally been applied to God's splitting of the Sea of Reeds and God's enabling of the one flask of oil to burn for eight days — in other words, to classical supernatural events in which we Reconstructionists do not literally believe.

Yet these traditional words can helpfully re-introduce a sense of awe, wonder, and thankfulness into our consciousness, a needed antidote to the modern tendency to reduce the wonders of nature and human development to their scientific causes, ignore their sacred dimension and thus impoverish our spirits.

Do you nevertheless remain resistant to using the word miracle? Consider, then, the interpretation of Rabbi Levi ben Gerson (Gersonides), a 14th-century Jewish philosopher who was as uncomfortable as we are with the notion that God intervenes supernaturally to perform miracles. Gersonides understood miracles as extraordinary events that violated no laws of nature but were sufficiently rare that most people are surprised by them. He believed it is the function of prophets, who have a heightened understanding of nature, to anticipate and point out these extraordinary events, and to use them to remind the rest of us of God's presence in the world.

Here, then, is a “traditional understanding” (over 600 years old, and published in traditional Bible commentaries) of miracles as natural events that evoke awe and wonder. A sunrise. Childbirth. Love. Insight. An unexpected recovery from illness. An unanticipated peace treaty. An overwhelming obstacle overcome. Miracles.

The Morning Blessings

Every Shahrarit morning service begins with *Birhot Hashahar*, the Morning Blessings, in which we praise God for such things as “making the blind to see,” “clothing the naked,” “making the captive free,” etc.

How can we honestly say that our non-supernatural God does these things? God doesn't cause blindness, and most blind people are never able to see. If the vision of a blind person is restored by surgery, thanking God for the work of the surgeon is a bit naive and saccharine.

In each of these cases, it is critically important to realize that our questions are not new in Jewish history. It is incorrect to imagine all of our ancestors as pious, simple peasants who thought they literally saw God's finger in every occurrence that impressed them. They knew that blind people don't see, that beggars in rags aren't provided with wardrobes, that captives often perish. And so we have a centuries-old treasury of interpretive traditions that give rich expression to the multiple meanings of these phrases.

There are many forms of blindness. We don't see because we fail to notice out of carelessness. Or because we are enraged. Or because we lack the insight that comes from maturity. Or because we are blinded by preconceptions or prejudice. Or because we had glaucoma or cataracts. Or because we lacked the right teachers and mentors. Or because cultural conceptions misled us. Seen in this way, all of life is a process of acquiring new and better sight, and God is the force within us and around us that helps us to grow in ever-new ways.

Each of these *berahot* (blessings) acknowledges an aspect of our experience in which it is possible to become frustrated, to lose hope, to get caught in a rut. The morning blessings are an invaluable tool to help us begin the new day by opening to new possibilities.

Each of us can be enriched in our own way by the experience of regular *davvenning*. Praying allows us to center our focus, to look inward, to be elevated beyond our individual concerns, and the words and structures of the traditional service can be very helpful in all these regards.

The answer to our prayers comes not from a supernatural God but from our own transformed hearts.

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