

## **Living a life of prayer**

*Rabbi Will Berkovitz*

*Hillel at the University of Washington*

Before I moved to Seattle I used to work in Las Vegas. I wasn't a dealer at the Bellagio or doing weddings dressed as Elvis, but at times I felt that way. I was working at a Conservative synagogue in the suburbs. It may not have been on the Strip but it certainly was just as colorful.

At the end of my interview weekend a member of the congregation, a physician, drove me to the airport. I asked him if the study of medicine brought him closer to belief in God or further away. Without hesitating he said, "Closer. And I remember the moment. It was when I first saw the trochlea, in Gross Anatomy."

The trochlea, he explained is a critical part of sight. It is a small round bone scarcely bigger than the head of pin. One of the tendons in the eye threads through this bone and does a 180-degree turn before attaching to the back of the eye socket. As a result, our eyes have the ability to track diagonally.

"It is perfect engineering. And I just felt it could not be random. It was just too perfect," he explained. It absolutely deepened this man's faith in a higher being.

To follow up, I asked whether the conversation of science and God ever comes up with his colleagues. His response was equally without hesitation: "Absolutely not."

He suggested, somewhat sadly, that there was something in the study of medicine that put the conversation off limits — an unwritten rule, a tacit agreement between physicians.

I have asked this question to many physicians, mostly Jewish, and the conversation virtually always follows a similar trajectory. Yes, the study of medicine has deepened their faith — brought them closer to a belief in God, and no, they would never speak to their colleagues about it. I find echoes of the Jewish experience in these responses.

Faith, prayer and our relationship with God are subjects we Jews rarely discuss. Perhaps because it is too personal, but more likely because we don't have the context for it — it makes us far too uncomfortable. As a way of shuffling off — avoiding the question — we claim these are not Jewish words. Not part of the Jewish dialogue.

The rabbis of our tradition would not understand our discomfort. For them, God, faith, and prayer were deeply Jewish words. Yet every day I see a very deep and very human hunger for a religious experience, for spirituality in Judaism.

The goal of Jewish learning is not education — nor should it be. The goal of Jewish learning is transformation. This was the rabbinic idea. Judaism is a journey of transformation, but far too often we spend our time teaching the details of halachah without talking about the point of halachah. For me it is a means to a greater end — it is the language to encounter and deepen my relationship with my God.

Last year I lost a friend and teacher to cancer — an extraordinary woman whose faith was something that emanated a light from her withering body. During our last conversation I asked her where she found such a profound faith. I still hear her voice answering my question: “Faith is found by actively seeking it and surrounding yourself with people who have it.”

I have taken her answer very seriously. Faith, prayer and God are deeply Jewish — and something that must be put back in the center of our tradition. The rabbis of the Talmud, who laid the foundation of our Judaism, presupposed God. Oddly, despite our love of rationalism, the Jewish tradition requires no leap of faith. It is more of a step of faith. And I am not suggesting that we should abandon reason, but equally we should not sacrifice faith at its altar. They both have their place, and at times that means allowing the two to be held in resonant tension.

As an exercise, I often ask students to take a small journal and jot down all the places over the course of the week where they experience the possibility of something greater, a higher power acting in the world. The answers they bring back are always as beautiful as they are profound — tears on skin, time slowing down as a leaf falls to the ground, community, evening sun on hardwood floors, steam rising from coffee, reflections, laughter, a comforting word, a grain of sand.

Our struggle is to make the old conversations new, to make the old experiences new. To not let words like God, prayer, faith or Torah cause such a shock to the system, but to hear those words the way our ancestors did.

We should not let those words be appropriated or co-opted. Let them breathe and live. Let us get back to the world of the rabbis. For me prayer, God, and faith are not things I pick up when I walk into a sanctuary and deposit in the bag with my tallit or tefillin when I leave. I strive to make the entirety of my life prayer — a constant striving to see God in the world and in the people around me.

The Jewish tradition has never claimed that prayer needs to be limited to the pages in a book. Faith is both a discipline and an art. Prayer requires practice and effort — I do not just mean davening on Shabbat. Cultivate a prayerful life — kavanot, prayers of the heart, seek a relationship with God that is vital, dynamic, and personal — prayer without the security of a language we do not understand. Learning to pray in our native language, our mother tongue.

How different would our lives be if we tried to live out what we declare with nishmat kol chai — the breath of all that lives praises you, our God. How would we pray differently if song filled our mouths as water fills the sea? Would joy flood our souls?

Perhaps we could never fully state our gratitude, but do we even try to live in a state of gratitude? What would it look like if we did?