

Prayer at Home, Prayer at Night

Genesis 28:16-17: Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.”

A. Talmud, Berakhot 26b: It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Yosi son of Rabbi H_{ann}ina: Abraham ordained the Morning Prayer (*Shaharit*), as it is said (Genesis 19:27), “Early the next morning Abraham arose to the place where he had stood before the Lord”. “Standing” means praying, as it is said (Psalm 106:30), “Then Phineas stood and prayed”. Isaac ordained the Afternoon Service (*Minhah*), as it is said (Genesis 24:63), “And Isaac went out into the field to meditate”. “Meditate” means praying, as it is said (Psalm 102:1), “A prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his meditation before the Lord”. Jacob ordained the Evening Service (*Arvit*), as it is said (Genesis 28:11), “He encountered (i.e., “alit upon”) a certain place and stopped there for the night”. “Encountered” means prayer, as it is said (Jeremiah 7:16), “As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, do not encounter (i.e. “plead with”) Me”.

B. Talmud Pesahim 88a: Rabbi Eleazar said, Why is it written (Isaiah 2:3), “And the many peoples shall go and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mount of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may instruct us in His ways and that we may walk in His paths’”—the God of Jacob, but not the God of Abraham and Isaac? The meaning is do not be like Abraham, of whom is written “mountain”, as it is said (Genesis 22:14), “whence the present saying, On the mount of the Lord there is vision”; or Isaac, of whom it is written “field”, as it is said (Genesis 24:63), “And Isaac went out into the field to meditate”. Rather, be like Jacob, who named Him “home”, as it is said (Genesis 28:19), “And he named that site Bethel” (literally, House of God, i.e., God is a home).

C. Abraham ibn Ezra (Spain 1089-1164): for there a person should pray in a time of need, and his prayer shall be heard for the place was selected (for that purpose).

D. Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno (Italy 1470?-1550): from the place where the ladder was, the Praised God, who stands nearby, will hear the prayers of petitioners, and from there their prayers will ascend to His holy dwelling in heaven.

Comments and Questions: *Time and place matter for prayer. In “C” and “D”, ibn Ezra and Sforno say that God must be there when we pray for needs (which can be broadly defined, e.g. money to eat, or saving from physical or spiritual peril), and from these places God will be readily accessible. Attitude also matters.*

*In “B”, from Pesahim, one can get the idea that we must live permanently with God (or perhaps just in a relationship with God). We visit a mountain or a field, but live at home. Home is a permanent in our lives. **What does this image of God as “Home” say about us and our relationship with God? Is that kind of relationship always attainable—and should it be?** (Think about Martin Buber’s two relationships “I-You”*

and “I-It”–while we want to live in an “I-You” relationship all the time, sometimes an “I-It” relationship is necessary.)

Maybe field and prayer symbolize both the emotional impact of nearness of location and the exertion of spiritual effort. Abraham’s model of standing on the mountain represents the extraordinary effort of elevating the spirit to move beyond the ordinary in order to attain the spiritual heights. Isaac’s meditating in the field signifies that we need to leave behind the clutter and the enclosed spaces in order to broaden our hearts and minds as a means to commune with God. Instead, we should be like Jacob and name our own site, “home”. Jacob teaches us to pray everywhere. Prayer can be said anywhere if we name it. In fact, we best pray at home, amidst the mundane, learning to concentrate within clutter, to grow inside the confines, that God is in fact everywhere, that we create a House of God wherever we are when we pray. **What does this say about the modern search for spirituality–the need to get away, be isolated, look for the extraordinary everywhere but the commonplace, and never in a required group ?**

In “A”, from Berakhot, while its purpose is to show the antiquity of prayer, it also points to purpose (the other opinion connects it to the Temple and to the sacrifices). Time matters. We pray morning, afternoon and evening for a reason.

Abraham prays in the morning, he hastens to fulfill the Creator’s will. He knows God has and will continue to help him, and everything will succeed for his descendants. He authors the first Amidah (the Standing Devotional) prayer, Avot, which emphasizes God and God’s connection to our ancestors–God governs the universe. Prayers recited through here discuss creation and the historical past in which God has redeemed us.

Isaac prays in the afternoon. We carve out a piece of time during the day, while busy, and acknowledge God. Like Isaac, we don’t spend much time. We are as certain as Abraham, but busy with our concerns. Isaac authors the second Amidah prayer, Gevurot, highlighting God’s power. Isaac was nearly (or was–see Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial) sacrificed. We don’t worry because God and we still watch out for us.

Jacob is different. Several times he expresses uncertainty (Genesis 28:20-22, where he bargains with God, Genesis 32: 8-13 and 34:30, where he utters his fear that God’s plan will fail). He prays at night, when we too are scared–will we wake in the morning, how can we protect ourselves in the dark (even while awake, let alone asleep–that is why we say Hashkivenu at night prayers and not in the morning; compare differences between the similar morning and night prayers, such as worry about future redemption). Yet Jacob writes the third Amidah prayer, Kedushah, holiness. This is both what God is and what influences God. Our holiness reflects our worthiness. God’s standing is based on our “place”, our “home” (see the other commentaries). We stand tall, despite our uncertainty (being in the dark), by acting holy while affirming God’s holiness, by calling out God’s name and eliciting God’s presence through prayer. **Does this change your view of routinized prayer, of prayer itself?**