

## **We Are the Sacrifice—On Prayer Flow and Spiritual Heterodoxy**

### **Shabbat Shirah Conversation on Prayer**

#### **Vayikra 5783**

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After listening to me now for eight months, you know that pluralism—the belief that there can be many different, legitimate ways of thinking and doing things—is something I hold as a core value.

And it's not only me: Pluralism is also a core principle of Reform Judaism. One of the ways which express our commitment to inclusion and diversity is by affirming that there is no *one* correct way to believe or practice. We Reform Jews have the freedom—and, in fact, the obligation—to think and discover for ourselves what works best for us religiously.

That's what makes us "heterodox" instead of "orthodox."

And it's a value that is as important *inside* this chapel as it is outside of it.

In Reform Judaism, there is not just *one* right way to have a prayer service. We are a diverse community; we each have our own tastes and preferences, so different prayer styles may be more or less appealing to each of us.

So, as a pluralist, it is my hope that we can create a palate of different prayer experiences that will meet the diverse spiritual needs of our congregants.

Our goal over the next few months is to experiment with a variety of musical styles, spatial arrangements, and traditional and modern rituals with open minds and open hearts, so we can get a sense of what works well for you and what doesn't.

Tonight's service is our first in this series of innovative worship experiences. We're calling it "Shabbat Shirah"—meaning, a "Shabbat of Song"—because tonight's service is all about singing.

But not just singing; it's meant to be a true experience—being *in* the music: letting it wash over you and *through* you; singing when you're moved to and listening when you're moved to do that; just being present in the moment and allowing yourself to really *feel* the energy of the people around you.

That's why we've arranged the room this way.

I know it's different. We invite you to just go with it.

Our hope is that sitting close together and seeing each other's faces will create an interactivity of the spirit that will be energizing and inspiring.

And then after the service, please join us downstairs in the atrium for a conversation about what you just experienced. Let us know what you thought and what you felt.

This is how we're going to deepen our connection to prayer, both as individuals and as a congregation.

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This week in the Torah, we start reading the *Book of Leviticus*—which, you probably know, is all about sacrifice—and it's the perfect parashah to frame our prayer experience tonight.

(Don't worry, we're not going to slaughter a goat on the bimah or anything. It's not *that* kind of experiment.)

This parashah is apropos because, as you know, ever since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago, prayer has taken the place of animal sacrifice.

But notice: I said prayer has taken the place of *animal* sacrifice—not that prayer has taken the place of *sacrifice*. This is a critical, if nuanced, distinction.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, possibly the most insightful writer about prayer in modern times, said: "Prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice. Prayer *is* sacrifice. What has changed is the substance of sacrifice: The *self* took the place of the *thing*. The spirit is the same."<sup>1</sup>

He explains that in *genuine* moments of prayer—when we're really in it and focused the way we should be—"We are the sacrifice."

Think about that.

What would it feel like to get to a spiritual zone in which you are not just mouthing words but actually presenting *yourself* as an offering to God?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, probably my favorite Jewish philosopher, teaches that you can't find this kind of prayer in a book.

Genuine prayer is not simply about reading words on a page or even singing along with a familiar melody.

Those things are important aids to prayer—but real prayer, Soloveitchik says, can only start *within* yourself.

It's about getting inside your heart and your mind and your soul, and tapping into your deepest emotions—especially those you can't even share with another person—and pouring your whole being out to God.

It takes some effort to go that deep. You can't just flip a switch and get there immediately.

Here's a metaphor I use to describe it for myself. I imagine the spiritual energy inside me as water; and as I concentrate and look inside myself, I can feel those spiritual waters welling up and building in force—harder and harder, like waves crashing against a dam; and as they get stronger, the dam can't contain them anymore and I need to open the dam and let the waters flow into something.

For me, that's what the words are for: to be that vessel that I can pour my spiritual energy into.

Soloveitchik paints a vivid image of this experience: "The action," he says, "is vehement and fervent, and in its rush and earnestness we see the consuming passion, a soul frightened and exalted, believing and rebelling, making a heroic effort to express the inexpressible."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine coming to services on Friday night and feeling *that*!

You *can* get to that place on your own if you try, but it's nothing compared to what you can experience when you get there in community, surrounded by the voices and spiritual energy of other people who are also reaching for that goal.

That's why Judaism teaches that a minyan of at least 10 adults is required: because you can't have the fullest possible prayer experience all by yourself.

This is supported by modern psychology, too.

This state of being in complete harmony with yourself and with the people around you has been called the state of "flow" by a psychologist and best-selling author by the name of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced Chick-sent-me-high).

When you're in flow, you're so fully immersed in what you're doing at that moment that, as he puts it, "psychic energy flows effortlessly,"<sup>3</sup> time passes without notice, joy is abundant, and "nothing else seems to matter."<sup>4</sup>

Csikszentmihalyi explains that communal singing is something that, for many people, helps to bring them into a state of flow.

When everyone is singing or clapping or vibing with the music together, he says, it can produce a "sense that one belongs to a group with a concrete, real existence"—a feeling that lies "at the roots of religious experience."<sup>5</sup>

This "union with other people," the merging of the self into the minyan in a genuine moment of prayer, is perhaps what the psalmist meant when he said, "*Va'ani t'filati l'kha Adonai et ratzon*—And I, I *am* my prayer to you at this favorable time."<sup>6</sup>

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So, as we begin our prayer service, I want to invite you to loosen your body, sink comfortably into your seat, and open yourself to the aesthetic experience of music.

We're using this handout instead of our prayer book so that we don't have to call out pages: We'll just flow from one song to the next.

But, truthfully, it doesn't really matter if you follow along or not.

Remember, prayer begins not on the page but within yourself.

So, I am giving you explicit permission—actually, inviting you—not to follow along with the page at all.

As Heschel said, "Ultimately, the goal of prayer is not to translate a word but to translate the self."<sup>7</sup>

So, if it's comfortable for you, just put the page down, close your eyes, and concentrate on what's going on inside yourself.

Sing along, if you can. Or hum along. Or clap, or tap your feet. Or just let it all wash over you.

There's no right way to participate in this service.

Just try to *be*. And let yourself *flow*.

*"Va'ani t'filati l'kha Adonai et ratzon*—And I, I *am* my prayer to you at this favorable time."

- 1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 71
- 2 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, 17
- 3 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 39
- 4 Ibid., 4
- 5 Ibid., 110
- 6 Psalm 69:14; "Mah Tov" – daily liturgy
- 7 Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 17