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The Mezuzah

Some years ago, when my wife and I were living in Israel, we bought our apartment from a fellow who (at the risk of severe understatement) was anti-religious. Given this background, a passing comment he made at our deal's closing seemed rather odd. He assured us that **all the Mezuzot in the house were completely kosher**. Noting my quizzical look, he then told my wife and I the following story:

Many years prior, his daughter had been born with a serious heart defect. After being told at the hospital that she didn't have long to live, he wandered the streets of Jerusalem in a daze. Finally, he came across an old Yemenite man and poured out his heart to him. The Yemenite advised him to buy Mezuzot and put them on his doorposts immediately.

Desperate for anything that could help his daughter, he ran to a religious neighborhood, asked where the nearest scribe lived, and bought several Mezuzot. After putting them up, he returned to the hospital where he was greeted with great news. Lo and behold, **a miracle had occurred**: His daughter's heart defect had disappeared!

When he finished telling us his story, the man then made a comment I will never forget. "You see" he said, "the Mezuzot are kosher. And if my daughter should ever **decide to become religious**, I can't stand in her way - because she belongs to God. But if my son ever tries to become religious ... I'll kill him!"

The Yemenite man's advice to put up Mezuzot, as strange as it may sound, is actually in line with Jewish tradition. In this week's Parsha, the verse dealing with the Mezuzah is **juxtaposed** with a verse promising long life to one's children (see Deut. 11:20-21). Both these verses are written on the parchment of the Mezuzah, and many commentators therefore explain that **Mezuzot help to protect children's health**.

But it is not children alone who benefit from the Mezuzah's presence. Written on the outside of each parchment is **the name of God, "Shadai."** Among other things, this divine appellation is an abbreviation for the words "Shomer D'larei Yisrael" - "**Guardian of the Gates of Israel.**" The Mezuzah, so to speak, guards the doors of a Jewish home.

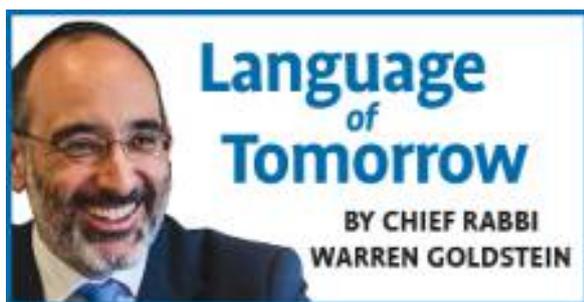
Other sources see a different meaning to the Mezuzah. The Alshich notes that the Mezuzah is placed even upon the doors of rooms **inside the house**. Oftentimes, how a person appears in public is a far cry from how he acts in private. The Mezuzah therefore reminds us of the

sanctity of the Jewish home.

Maimonides presents what is perhaps the most widely accepted understanding of Mezuzah. He explains that oftentimes people get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of making a living, that they lose their "God consciousness." The Mezuzah, however, provides a wonderful solution to this problem.

The Mezuzah contains **a declaration of our Love of God** and our commitment to observe His mitzvot. As we pass through the door and **kiss the Mezuzah**, we focus on God's inspirational "instructions for living," posted on the wall.

Says Maimonides: The Mezuzah is a constant reminder "that nothing endures forever; nothing is eternal but knowledge of the Almighty. Upon reminding himself of this fact, a person will return to a proper consciousness and walk in a proper path."



What Does It Mean To Pray?

In 2001, a study conducted at Duke University Medical Center on a group of 150 cardiac patients uncovered some extraordinary findings. The patients, all of whom were receiving post-operative therapy treatment, were split into two subgroups – one subgroup had people praying for their wellbeing, the other subgroup didn't.

The findings showed the subgroup that was prayed for had significantly better treatment outcomes than those who received the treatment alone.

Most notably, the study was double-blind – neither the researchers, nor those being prayed for, knew about the prayers. And it wasn't a once-off either. A comparable double-blind study, conducted at San Francisco General Hospital's Coronary Care Unit, demonstrated very similar results. Whether we are praying for ourselves or others are praying for us, the influence prayer can have on our experience – both in and of the world – is immense.

This week's parsha calls on us to serve God "with all your heart" (Devarim 10:12). The Gemara (Ta'anit 2a) explains this "service of the heart" to be referring to prayer. The Rambam (Laws of Prayer, chapter 1) derives from here the requirement to pray every day. He explains how, originally, this mitzvah was fulfilled informally and at one's own discretion. There were no set times of the day to pray, and no formalised prayer service. It was completely spontaneous, provided it happened at least once in the day.

But, in the wake of the Babylonian exile, and the great social and spiritual upheaval that came with it, the sages of that time realised the importance of formalising and giving structure to prayer. And so it was that one of the great institutions of Jewish history, "the Men of the Great Assembly", which included many great prophets and sages, composed the words of the Amidah, the central Jewish prayer to be recited three times a day – morning, afternoon and evening (*shacharit*, *mincha* and *maariv*). We recite their words in this structure to this day.

The Amidah encompasses the three components that make up the minimum definition of Jewish prayer – praise, petition and thanks. In the opening three blessings, we offer praise of our Creator. In the next 13 blessings, we articulate our needs and ask God to fulfil them. And the final three blessings are words of thanks and acknowledgement. It's controlled, systematic, finely tuned.

But what exactly is "service of the heart"?
Where does that come in?

At its essence, prayer is about cultivating an emotional connection – a real relationship – with God. If done right, prayer can be a direct encounter with the Divine. The Rambam says that having *kavanah* – deep intention, awareness and devotion – is vital. Rav Chaim Soloveitchik explains that *kavanah* is a basic awareness that we are in the presence of God when we pray; that we aren't just mouthing the words and going through the motions, but are having a private audience with the Creator of the universe. This state of mind can put us into a very powerful emotional state – and this is what "service of the heart" is all about. Our role model for how to pray, says the Gemara (Brachot 31a), is Chana, one of the greatest women in Jewish history. The Torah relates how Chana, the mother of Samuel the Prophet, was unable to fall pregnant, and came to the Temple to pray. The verse describes her prayer as follows: "And Chana was speaking from her heart. Only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard." (Samuel 1:1-13)

On this, the Gemara says: "How many important laws can be learnt from these verses relating to Chana. 'Chana was speaking from her heart'. From here [we learn] that one who prays

must direct his heart [towards God]. 'Her lips moved.' From here [we learn] that one who prays must pronounce [the words] with his lips. 'But her voice was not heard.' From here [we learn] that it is wrong to raise one's voice during his prayers."

When we pray, we need to articulate the words, but we do so in a whisper. The Amidah is known as the "Silent Prayer". It brings a profound sense of silence and tranquillity into our lives; a few precious moments each day to meditate on and reinforce our spiritual connection to God, and to reflect on who we are. We do so in God's presence and connect with Him through our reflection. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the origin of the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefillah*, is *lehitpallel*, which means to self-reflect. The silence of prayer allows us to do exactly that in the presence of God.

There's also an intimacy in whispering. When we whisper to someone, it is an intimate moment. Likewise, when we whisper our prayers to God, we feel close and connected to Him. We feel His love for us and we express our love for Him, and that transforms our whole relationship with the Torah, with ourselves and the rest of creation. Whispering is also an indication of God's closeness to us during these intimate moments. And the fact that we have this private audience with God is not something to take for granted. Consider how difficult, or even impossible, it is to have a private conversation with someone in high office or a venerated public figure. And yet, through prayer, we have privileged access to the King of all kings, the Creator of the universe. And we have it whenever we want!

Friends – during these deep, intimate, emotional moments, we praise God and give thanks to Him, but most importantly, we make ourselves vulnerable to Him. The heart and soul of prayer is articulating our needs, what we are lacking, where we are falling short. In fact, requests make up 13 of the 19 blessings in the Amidah. The Maharal says that through prayer, we make the declaration that we are completely dependent on God for our needs. He explains that this is why prayer is called "service". We are God's servants in the sense that our welfare is entirely in His hands. And during prayer, we turn to Him for help and support, with the faith that whatever the outcome, it is ultimately for our good, and a pure expression of His love.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (OC 2:24) says turning to God in times of need and distress is the ultimate expression of faith. It's a recognition that nothing in this world can happen without God's blessing; that whatever effort we put in, the result is entirely dependent on God's will. When we pray for the recovery of someone who is sick, or for the success of a new business venture, we do so mindful of the fact that the doctors and the medicines, the business models and strategic planning, are merely the instruments through which God works. Our entire existence is in the hands of the One who loves us and wants only what's best for us.

Prayer is a deep emotional and spiritual experience. It's the entire basis of our relationship with God. This is why our sages guide us and implore us not to treat prayer as a burdensome duty, as something to be discharged. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says: "Do not make your prayer fixed, rather mercy and supplication before God." (2:13) Because we pray three times a day and it's a set formula

from a set prayer book, we can start seeing it as something perfunctory, something we do because we feel obliged to. But the Mishna is telling us that prayer needs to be real and raw and heartfelt, and not just something we do as a matter of course. It has to be a service of the heart. Passionate prayer – true service of the heart – brings us close to our Creator. It nourishes us spiritually and emotionally. It has the power to inspire and invigorate every aspect of our lives. It can even change our bodies.



Seeing the Reality

In this portion, Moses makes an amazing statement: "And now, Israel, what does God ask from you other than to fear Him..." (Deut. 10:12)

Moses has just given us commandment, after commandment, after commandment in God's name. And near the end of it all, what does he say? "Well, all that God really wants is that you fear Him!" What about all those other 612 mitzvot that God said He wanted?

And why does God want us to fear Him anyway; is it a power trip, like the Wizard of Oz? Does it make God feel greater if we are afraid?

The answer lies in the etymology of the word "fear" in Hebrew. It has exactly the same root as

the word "see." "Fearing" and "seeing" are integrally connected. Ignorance is bliss, as they say. That which you do not "see," you do not "fear."

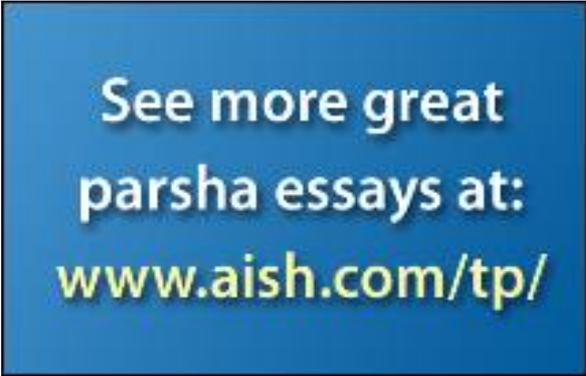
The word "fear" would be better translated as "awareness of consequences," "recognition of the reality of a situation." What does God want? He wants us to face reality and not to hide from that which we know to be true. Over and over again in our lives, we know what we should do, we know what makes sense for us - but we are unwilling to face that reality because it is too uncomfortable. We choose the comfort of lying to ourselves, over the struggle of reality. Reality is almost always harsh. Delusion is always so enticing.

You don't want to face the fact that a relationship is over. You know that it is, without a doubt. But you need it. So you convince yourself that it is not. Or you don't want to face the fact that you've made a mistake and need to change. It's painful and humbling to think that we are not perfect. We'd so much rather create an illusion of perfection. So we blame someone else: parents, spouse, the world, God - anything but to face the reality of being wrong!

What about someone who doesn't want to face the reality of his own unhappiness? He'll put on a show and pretend how happy he is. Not for the world, but for himself. No one wants to admit that they are so lost, they don't even know how to be happy.

So what does God want from us? Only that we be honest. Honest with ourselves. We always know what is right. But rarely are we willing to admit it (to ourselves). So Moses advises: See. Be cognizant. All the rest will follow. Hide from

reality and you will miss the boat. It may create a beautiful illusion... but when the bubble bursts, nothing will remain.



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