

How Prayer Influences God  
--notes from classical Jewish thought

Consider the petitions of Moses to God after the construction of the Golden Calf, the spies and Korach's rebellion. The question that is raised is: Was not God already aware from the beginning of the arguments which Moses was to advance to mitigate the severity of the divine decree?

What was significant, the rabbis say, is not the persuasiveness of his argument--the omniscient God would already be aware of that--but that Moses demonstrated his courage in facing God.

During the period in which Moses approached God, he struggled with the Schechinah (the presence of God, incidentally, always female) for the abolition of the decree sentencing the nation to destruction, and for the continuance of divine grace in their midst. He did not attempt to minimize the gravity of their offense, he advanced arguments to avert the decree.

God threatened: "Now therefore let me alone that my wrath may wax hot against them and that I might consume them and I will make a great nation of you."

Moses adduced three contentions in reply:

- (1) Why shall you wax hot against the people you brought forth from Egypt?
- (2) Why should the Egyptians claim: For evil did he bring them forth to slay them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth. Turn from your fierce wrath and repent of this evil against your people.
- (3) Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants, to whom you did swear by your own self and said to them: I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and all this land that I have spoken of I will give to your seed and they shall inherit it forever.

"And God repented of the evil which he said he would do to his people."

These questions arise:

- (1) Does the omniscient God need to listen to the pleas of the sons of men?
- (2) Were not Moses' arguments obvious to God even before he had uttered them?
- (3) How then could they have affected God's decision.

Prayer of the righteous is likened to a pitchfork. Just as a pitchfork transfers grain from one place to another, so does the prayer of the righteous transform God's attributes from anger to compassion.

a possible explanation:

God rendered his verdict against the people in accordance with the gravity of their crime. However, he wished the righteous leader of the generation, Moses, to express all the pleas stemming from points of view other than strict justice, i.e., the consideration of God's previous acts; what the Gentiles would say (this being a desecration of the Divine Name among the nations), and the memory of the Covenant.

Obviously, God knew all the arguments. Yet he elevated Moses, the greatest of all men, to the height where he could represent, in opposition to the attribute of justice, the attribute of mercy, and present all arguments for extermination.

On one hand, Moses acted as a mouthpiece for the Shechinah. Here however, he

reaches the very summit of human achievement. He is the bearer, the representative, of one of God's attributes, demanding the fusion of the attribute of mercy with the attribute of justice.

In this view, there was no change in the divine conduct. God did not want to destroy the people. Only the formulation of the argument entrusting the arguments for clemency to Moses were changed.

Moses took hold of God by the coat, so to speak, and said, "Sovereign of the Universe! I will not let you go until you forgive and pardon them!"

From R. Judah: "Repentance effects half atonement but prayer secures complete atonement. When Cain repented, half the decree against him was rescinded. (Cain's is the first recorded instance of prayer in the Bible.)

Talmudic passage: "The God of Israel said, "I rule man. Who rules me? The Righteous, for I issue a decree and he can annul it."

Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven. This is not in the hand of heaven, since the righteous has control over it.

Maimonides regards the power of prayer and the changes it effects as one of the veiled miracles of the world. "All our prayers are miraculous," he said. "However, the change they effect is not outwardly visible in nature."

The reason which leads men to doubt the efficacy of prayer is the same which leads them to ~~deny~~ deny God's prescience.

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an argument: Either God has determined that a given person should receive a given benefit or he has not. If he has not determined, how can prayer avail to change God's will that he should now determine to benefit the person when he had not determined so before.

And if a person does not prepare himself, he withholds the good from himself. If ~~it~~ it has been determined that a person's crops shall prosper in a given year, and he neglects to sow and plow, then God may bring the most abundant rain down on earth, but his crops will not prosper seeing that he has not ploughed or sowed. That is, he withheld the good from himself because he did not prepare himself to receive it.

Divine decrees are conditional upon the recipient being in a certain state and degree of preparation. If that changes, then the decree also changes.

A change of name may avail and nullify a decree and so may a change of conduct.

Prayer and right conduct help to prepare a person to receive ~~the~~ the good influence or to nullify the evil that has been decreed concerning him because he changes from the evil state in which he was.

According to Albo, all changes occurring in human fate through prayer must correspond with the change in conduct of the worshipper--or at least with his intention to change.

Yet---Rav Kook says the main character of prayer is not to effect any change in human affairs. It is a necessary, natural human need and a human pleasure. It enables the soul to come near to the Creator. There is a distinction between the true essence of God, which is not subject to change, and the description of God as Father or Kind, in which ~~such~~ sphere or understanding it is still possible to speak of change caused by prayer.

Prayer really transforms or elevates man and in this way is capable of affecting change.

Before one begins, one must feel the need of praying and the pleasure it entails. Prayer does not seek to change anything in God's nature which is the source of all eternity and is immutable. .. but to elevate the worshipper, with all the changes affecting his being and in spite of his soul being attached to the world, to the level of divine exaltation.

Prayer speaks of the Divine, as far as it is capable, and for which it longs most freely -- and in this freedom its light and truth become manifest. It speaks to God as to a reigning King who is subject to change -- as to a father who is ready to relent, as to a righteous and generous individual who increases his generous and charitable grants when stimulated by outside forces. This takes place when the soul craves to rise up to God, it already elevates itself by its own will (and its own will is its own essential nature.)

Prayer must of necessity be purged of any thought that it changes → God's will or His activity, a fallacious idea, in relation to God which corrupts the pattern of human perfection. Contrarily, in its essential quality and with the conviction that it operates in the framework of its conditions (even without its effect in attaining the fulfillment of its requests and the elevation of the worthiness of the soul), prayer is the cornerstone in the achievement of human perfection. Hence, every worshipper should understand that prayer is a miraculous principle, established by God, in the world, to allow his creatures to attain all types of perfection, and especially the ethical perfection to which it gives rise.

But it does not, Heaven forbid, regulate God.

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The hebrew word for prayer, Hitpallel, originally meant to judge oneself, to deliver an opinion about oneself, to step out of active life in order to gain a true judgment about oneself.