



Praying for a Sustainable World

By Evonne Marzouk¹

“Change your lightbulb! Call your senator! Buy a hybrid car!” Today’s environmental movement seems to focus strongly on doing. There are things to buy, actions to take, policies to advocate.

It is rare for environmentalists to think of prayer as a tool for change. Yet Jewish teachings express a very different view of prayer.² Prayer is one of the key tools that God has given us to change the world, and it is our responsibility and opportunity to pray for the health of the earth and human civilization living on it and with it.

At the moment before the human was first created, the Torah expresses an important lesson about our role in creation:

Now all the plants (siah) of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted, for Hashem G-d had not yet sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to work the soil.” (Gen. 2:5)

Rashi comments based on the Talmud:

For what is the reason that G-d had not yet sent rain, because there was no man to work the land and there was no one to acknowledge the goodness of the rain, and when man came and knew that they (the rain) are a need for the world, he prayed for them and they came down, and the trees and grasses sprouted.”³

In this understanding of our creation story, the very first task of the person is recognizing G-d, and then praying to G-d on behalf of creation. As Rabbi Daniel Kohn explains (based on Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook), one of the first acts of humans on this planet was to care for creation – by praying for it.⁴

Traditionally, Jews pray three times a day. The Talmud identifies Isaac as instituting the afternoon prayer service, based on the verse: “And Isaac went out to su’ah in the field before evening” (Gen. 24:63).⁵ The word “su’ach” is unclear, but the Sages conclude that he was praying based on the linguistic similarity between this word and another reference for prayer in the Psalms.

Based on this, Rabbi Natan Sternhartz teaches: “Meditation and prayer are called '*sichah*.' A plant or shrub is called '*si'ach*.' When the plants of the field begin to return to life and grow, they all yearn to be included in one's *sichah*, in meditation and prayer.”⁶ This implies that not only does G-d want our prayers for the creation – the natural world is seeking them, as well.

¹ The author acknowledges Rabbi Yonatan Neril for his helpful editorial suggestions on this piece.

² This article reflects a meaningful approach to Jewish prayer focusing on its relationship to nature and protecting the environment. This represents one Jewish understanding of prayer. Within our rich tradition, of course, there are others as well.

³ Rashi to *Genesis 2:5*, s.v. *ki lo hintir*, based on *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chullin p. 60b*.

⁴ Essays on Prayer, distributed in 2011.

⁵ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot 26b*

⁶ Sichot HaRaN

Perhaps reflecting the importance of the prayer-human-creation relationship, the liturgy of Jewish prayers is filled with nature imagery and recognition of our dependence on natural resources. Nature takes on symbolic roles in relationship to humanity, to G-d, and to righteous activities for which we are encouraged to strive:

“A righteous person will flourish like a date palm, like a cedar in the Lebanon he will grow tall. Planted in the house of Hashem, in the courtyards of our G-d they will flourish. They will still be fruitful in old age, vigorous and fresh they will be.”⁷

Jewish prayers also help us recall and appreciate the beauty and consistency of nature, and how much we rely upon it and its Creator. This constancy is alluded to in the Psalm (repeated each morning in the Jewish liturgy):

“He Who illuminates the earth and those who dwell upon it, with compassion; and in His goodness renews daily, perpetually, the work of creation.”⁸

These nature-centric verses in the Jewish liturgy remind us to be grateful to G-d for providing the natural world we live in, and themselves serve as a prayer for continued blessing of natural resources.

Many of us long to make a difference in healing the world today. According to Jewish mystical teachings, our desire to make a difference comes from our souls.⁹ Prayers are the language of the soul, and by praying we can affect ourselves and the world around us. It is also a basic Jewish understanding that when we pray, G-d listens and acts on the physical reality based on our prayer. Jewish tradition is filled with descriptions of these types of effective prayers.^{10,11}

Jewish teachings help us realize that a moment spent in prayer is an active moment, with the power to make a difference. When we pray with a community, we become connected to the needs of the community and the rest of the world. To pray on behalf of the entire planet is to summon the entire earth within us.

Prayer is a vision for what can become, with a heart full of hope, inspiring a brighter future. Today, perhaps the most important thing for us all to pray for is the health of the earth and of a return to balance within human civilization. Let us pray.

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⁷ Psalms 92:13-15, translation of Artscroll Siddur.

⁸ Morning blessings before Shema, as found in Artscroll Siddur, p 85-87.

⁹ Based on the teachings of Rabbi Daniel Kohn on prayer, taught at Yeshivat Hamivtar in 2010.

¹⁰ For example, Moses' prayer for forgiveness, Exodus 32:32

¹¹ For example, Chanah's prayer for a child, I Samuel 1:11