

## FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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## THE CONSTANT PRAYER OF THE SOUL

*Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook*

### INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Kook's notion of prayer falls inevitably into the charmed circle of mystical experiences that constitute the central events in his spiritual life. "Man is by nature mystical," asserts Rabbi Kook, (*Ha-machshavah Ha-yisraelit* p. 26), and every noble expression of a human being as well as his ethical and esthetic aspirations yearn to return to the source of all life.

The same is emphatically true of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook himself. Born in 1865 in the little town of Grieve in Northwestern Russia, the ideals of piety and love of learning were the two central foundations of his environment. Mysticism came naturally to him. At the tender age of nine, he already was regarded as a phenomenal student and earned the proud appellation of *illuy*, child prodigy. When he arrived in Volozhin, the leading Torah center of Russia, at the age of nineteen, his qualities for spiritual leadership matured and the way was paved for a great destiny. In 1904, he settled in Israel as Rabbi of Jaffa, and in 1919 he became the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazic Kehilah in Jerusalem. This period was the most fruitful in his notable career. He became the champion of religious nationalism and applied the method of intellectual persuasion for the return of youth to religion. He regarded nationalism as the first step to a return to Judaism and urged that irreligious youth not be rebuffed. Much of his writing was intended for the youth of his day. His chief literary output, however, was concerned with

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Halakhah, problems, commentaries on the Siddur and on *Piyutim* and above all, mystical philosophy. His *magnum opus* was the *Orot Ha-Kodesh* of which three volumes appeared posthumously, containing his conception of the universe, the nature of man, and a theory of nationalism. He died on the third day of Elul 5695 (1935).

The art of prayer, according to Rabbi Kook, embraces two essential principles. One is that prayer is an altogether cosmic phenomenon. Everything in nature turns its face to God in worship. "Every flower and blade of grass, every grain of sand and clod of earth . . . the smallest beings of creation and the largest . . . everything longs and aspires, craves and yearns for the perfection of its high, holy, pure, and mighty source" (*Olat Riyah*, Introduction, p. 13).

Since prayer is built into the very structure of the universe, its fulfillment is in itself a phase of nature. It is an outstretching of the human will coming into harmony with the cosmic will and directed toward the divine will. The efficacy of prayer, therefore, does not involve a suspension of the laws of nature but rather their implementation.

The other principle of prayer is in effect an outgrowth of the first. If all creation turns everlastingly to the Divine in prayer, then quite obviously man, too, is in constant prayer. Man's soul is continually in a state of worship. And when we give conscious expression to the constant potential of worship in our souls, it is more than an exercise of pious devotion. It is a craving for the spiritual development and ultimate perfection of the native endowments which the Almighty has bestowed upon us. Articulate prayer helps to move the soul's yearning for inner fulfillment from a state of potentiality to actuality which is, in reality, the silent prayer of all creation. Emanating thus from the higher regions of his being where the soul is praying perpetually, worship is an inner necessity, a natural process, and not an artificial invention of man.

Moreover, if prayer is the highest expression of the religious experience of man, then the Prayer Book is the very embodiment of the "lights of holiness," illuminating our pathway with its hallowed expressions and orderly arrangements of a fixed mode of worship, and leading us to the ultimate perfection of our being. No wonder that Rabbi Kook poured the fragrance and essence of a lifetime of religious experience into his uncompleted commentary to the standard Siddur, his *Olat Riyah*. He began the commentary in 1914 and it took him a lifetime to write it. It was still incomplete in 1935, when his strength began to ebb rapidly and the hand of death put an end to his

## *From the Pages of Tradition*

life's work.

What follows is a translation of the first part of the Introduction to *Olat Riyah*, his commentary on the *Siddur*. As in all his other works, the language is poetic, strongly imaginative, and mystical. The content sparkles with penetrating insights and absorbing metaphysical judgments.

LEON D. STITSKIN

The constant prayer of the soul struggles to emerge from concealment into the open, spread out over all the living faculties of the spirit and soul as well as over all the forces of the entire living body. It likewise yearns to reveal its essence and the power of its activity in the environment, in the universe, and in life. For this reason we are in need of these cosmic judgments which are derived from the study of Torah and Wisdom. As a result, preoccupation with Torah and its wisdom is the constant unfolding of hidden prayer of the soul. "The soul of every living being shall bless Thy name O Lord, our God."

### II

Proper prayer issues only from the consciousness that, in truth, the soul is always in prayer. Indeed, the soul hovers about and clings to her beloved ceaselessly; but during the time of actual worship the perpetual supplication of the soul is revealed *in actu*. This is the joy and delight, the splendor and glory of worship which is like a rose that opens its beautiful petals towards the dew or the sun's rays that stream down upon her with their dazzling light. Indeed, "would that man prayed all day."

### III

Prayer encourages the soul to fulfill its appointed task. When days and years have gone by without meaningful worship (*tefillah be'kavvanah*), there accumulate in one's heart numerous stumbling blocs that produce a feeling of inner spiritual sluggishness. When, however, a healthy attitude returns and the gift of prayer is restored from on high, the barriers are cleared away with every supplication and the numerous clogging blocs

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

that accumulated in the flowing streams of the upper reaches of the soul gradually vanish. And with the ascension of the soul that soars with every prayer, depending on the nature of its time, certain portions of it come to heal the inadequacies of the past. To be sure, the deficiency is not overcome all at once; it is a gradual process, as the luminous source of prayer slowly reveals its lights.

### IV

Prayer actualizes and brings into light and perfect life that which is concealed in the deepest recesses of the soul. In accordance with the inward purity of man is the effectiveness of his prayer as his inner will emanates from the depths and as he turns toward the Source of life, of all souls, and of all worlds. Great and marvelous are the effects of its articulation on life. A great light issues from the spoken word. It emerges from the hidden treasures of a rich and abundant life. According to the measure of its inner penetration is the expanse of the illumination unfolded, engendered, created. The clarity of the prayer's expression clarifies the details of the light, informing reality with a clear and well-defined will, and it is impossible for prayer not to leave its imprint on all things.

Whether prayer proceeds in accordance with its own individual goals, or in a roundabout, complicated way — these belong to the mysteries of the All-Knowing God. In any event, we are aware of a majestic and everlasting edifice that comes into view with the act of prayer whether the latter is fixed and formal or an individualized supplication flowing from the depths of the hearts of individuals or communities, depending upon need and circumstance. Together with all cosmic phenomena, above and below, coupled with all the efforts of man to attain perfection in the practical, social, intellectual, and technical areas which help in the attainment of a more abundant and pleasant life for the individual as well as in the process of fashioning a more orderly world externally and in certain ways also internally, there comes above all the inner organizing principle which is the primary cause of all desires, namely, *prayer* that

### *From the Pages of Tradition*

lends strength and power to all branches of life, to all cultural devices and their perfections. Man must clearly evaluate the proper balance and interdependence between prayer and deed. "For My house is a house of prayer for all peoples."

## V

Prayer deepens within us the lofty and sacred perception which is the essence of the divine light in our souls and it sows within us holy lights that blossom forth with the fruit of salvation. But it is not only for us alone, as isolated individuals in our private capacities, that prayer does all this, but for us and our people in relation to all being, to all life and existence in all its phases, past, present, and future. How wonderful the illumination, how exalted the sparks that issue forth with increasing intensity from every prayer even if it is of a temporary, individual, and isolated nature; all the more so when it is a set, communal, and universal petition! It flows from the divine fountain on high in which everything that is lofty and sacred, sublime and exalted, is included and from which it flows and to which it returns with mighty power and strength replete with unqualified holiness. Prayer adds blessings to the Fountain of Life, branches out the Tree of Life and adorns its twigs with splendor. The rivulets it irrigates mingle one with another and the numerous variety of saps, fraught with splendor and light, fill the rivers of delight that supply bliss and the fragrance of eternal emanation — all uniting together and becoming a source of blessing to the rivers of the great and eternal love and a blessing and peace to all existence.

When the petitions of Israel are lifted to sacred heights and concentrate in the region of eternal delight and in the heaven which is the sanctuary of the Eternal God, blessed be He, streams of light illumine the entire universe, myriads of souls are renewed in supernal splendor, exalted ideals are lifted with sacred pride, and the transcendental glory is praised forever and ever. "Blessed be the glory of God from its place."

VI

Prayer is for us and for the whole world an absolute necessity and also the most pure kind of joy.

The waves of our souls beat uninterruptedly. We demand of ourselves and of the world a perfection that existence, with its limitations, cannot grant us. We thus find ourselves in deep despair and in a mood of frustration that can turn us against our better judgment and against our Creator. But before this cancer has had enough time to spread within us, we come to pray. We pour out our words in prayer and uplift ourselves to a world of absolute perfection. Then our inner world too is rendered, in truth, absolutely perfect and our mind is filled with serenity. And the same rhythmic process that our inner will effects in all existence, of which it is a part, inclines the balance of the whole world toward the side of merit.

VII

Prayer is the ideal of all the worlds. All being aspires toward the Source of its life; every flower and every blade of grass, every grain of sand and every clod of earth, everything which pulsates visibly with life and everything in which life is concealed, the smallest and the largest creatures, the angels and the holy seraphim, all the details of being and all its universality — all yearns, longs, aspires, and craves for the perfection of its lofty, living, holy, pure, and mighty Source. Man absorbs all these longings at all times and occasions and he is uplifted and edified through this holy desire. The time for the unfolding of these holy desires comes in prayer, which sends forth waves of light freely and in sacred reflection to the Almighty's wide expanses. Man elevates with his prayer all creation, unites with him all being, raises and exalts everything to the Source of blessing and the Origin of life.