

## **the many purposes of prayer**

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Prayer serves many aims. It serves to save the inward life from oblivion. It serves to alleviate anguish. It serves to partake of God's mysterious grace and guidance. Yet, ultimately, prayer must not be experienced as an act for the sake of something else. We pray in order to pray.

Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to, the challenges we face. Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will upon God; he seeks to impose God's will and mercy upon himself. Prayer is necessary to make us aware of our failures, backsliding, transgressions, sins.

Prayer is more than paying attention to the holy. Prayer comes about as an event. It consists of two inner acts: an act of turning and an act of direction. I leave the world behind as well as all interests of the self. Divested of all concerns, I am overwhelmed by only one desire: to place my heart upon the altar of God.

To pray is to open a door, where both God and soul may enter. Prayer is arrival, for Him and for us. To pray is to overcome distance.

Though often I do not know how to pray, I can still say: Redeem me from the agony of not knowing what to strive for, from the agony of not knowing how my inner life is falling apart.

Human distress, wretchedness, agony, is a signal of a universal distress. It is a sign of human misery; it also proclaims a divine predicament. God's mercy is too great to permit the innocent to suffer. But there are forces that interfere with God's mercy, with God's power. This is a dreadful mystery as well as a challenge: God is held in captivity.

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Our task is to hallow time, to enable Him to enter our moments, to be at home in our time, in what we do with time.

Our hope is to enact, to make real the magnification and sanctification of this name here and now.

Prayer must not be dissonant with the rest of living. The mercifulness, gentleness, which pervades us in moments of prayer is but a ruse or a bluff, if it is inconsistent with the way we live at other moments. The divorce of liturgy and living, of prayer and practice, is more than a scandal; it is a disaster. A word uttered in prayer is a promise, an earnest, a commitment. If the promise is not kept, we are guilty of violating a promise. A liturgical revival cannot come about in isolation. Worship is the quintessence of living. Perversion or suppression of the sensibilities that constitute being human will convert worship into a farce. What is handicapping prayer is not the antiquity of the Psalms but our own crudity and spiritual immaturity.

The hour calls for a revision of fundamental religious concerns. The wall of separation between the sacred and the secular has become a wall of separation between the conscience and God.

Religion as an establishment must remain separated from the government. Yet prayer as a voice of mercy, as a cry for justice, as a plea for gentleness, must not be kept apart. Let the spirit of prayer dominate the world. Let the spirit of prayer interfere in the affairs of man. Prayer is private, a service of the heart; but let concern and compassion, born out of prayer, dominate public life.

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Prayer calls for self-reflection, for contrition and repentance, examining and readjusting deeds and motivations, for recanting the ugly compulsions we follow, the tyranny of acquisitiveness, hatred, envy, resentment.

We have no triumphs to report except the slow, painstaking effort to redeem single moments in the lives of single men, in the lives of small communities. We do not come on the clouds of heaven but grope through the mists of history.

There is a pressing urgency to the work of justice and compassion. As long as there is a shred of hatred in a human heart, as long as there is a vacuum without compassion anywhere in the world, there is an emergency.

You and I have prayed, have craved to be able to make gentleness a certainty, and have so often failed. But there are in the world so many eyes streaming with tears, hearts dumb with fears, that to be discouraged would be treason.