

Prayer as a Liberal Jewish Response to Crisis

Exodus 2:23-25

A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ
מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם
אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה: וַיִּשְׁמַע
אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים
אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק
וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב: וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים:

Leviticus 10:3

Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Eternal meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people.” And Aaron was silent.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן הוּא
אֲשֶׁר־דָּבַר יְהוָה | לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִי
אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל־פָּנָי כָּל־הָעָם אֶכְבֹּד
וַיֵּדַם אַהֲרֹן:

Numbers 12:13

And Moses cried out to the Eternal One, saying, “O God, pray heal her!”

וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל
נָא רַפֵּא נָא לָהּ:

2 Samuel 1:25-27

How have the mighty fallen in the thick of battle - Jonathan, slain on your heights! I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan, you were most dear to me. Your love was wonderful to me more than the love of women. How have the mighty fallen, the weapons of war perished!

אֵיךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים בְּתוֹךְ הַמִּלְחָמָה
יְהוֹנָתָן עַל־בְּמוֹתַיִךְ חָלָל: כּוֹ צֶרֶל־לִי
עָלֶיךָ אָחִי יְהוֹנָתָן נֶעְמְתָ לִי מְאֹד
נִפְלְאָתָה אֶהְבֶּתְךָ לִי מֵאֶהְבֵּת נָשִׁים:
כּוֹ אֵיךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים וַיֵּאָבְדוּ כָּלִי
מִלְחָמָה:

Jonah 2:2-7

Jonah prayed to the Eternal One his God from the belly of the fish. He said: In my trouble I called to the Eternal One, and He answered me: from the belly of Sheol I cried out, and You heard my voice. You cast me into the depths, into the heart of the sea, the floods engulfed me; all your breakers and billows swept over me. I thought I was drive away out of Your sight: would I ever gaze again upon Your holy Temple? The waters closed in over me, the deep engulfed me. Weeds twined around my heard. I sang to the base of the mountains; the bars of the earth closed upon me forever....

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו מִמְעֵי
הַדָּגָה: וַיֹּאמֶר קָרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי
אֶל־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲנֵנִי מִבֶּטֶן שְׂאוֹל
שׁוּעָתִי שָׁמַעְתָּ קוֹלִי: וַתִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי
מִצּוּלָה בְּלִבְבַּי יָמִים וְנָהָר יִסְבְּבֵנִי
כָּל־מִשְׁבָּרֶיךָ וְגַלְיָךָ עָלַי עָבְרוּ:
וְאֲנִי אָמַרְתִּי נִגְרַשְׁתִּי מִנְּגַד עֵינֶיךָ
אֶךְ אוֹסִיף לְהַבִּיט אֶל־הַיִּכָּל קִדְשֶׁךָ:
אֶפְפוּנֵי מַיִם עַד־נֶפֶשׁ תְּהוֹם
יִסְבְּבֵנִי סוּף חָבוּשׁ לְרֹאשִׁי: לְקַצְבֵי
הָרִים יִרְדְּתִי הָאָרֶץ בְּרַחֲמֶיהָ בְּעַדִּי
לְעוֹלָם

Psalm 6:2-5

O Eternal One, do not punish me in anger, do not chastise me in fury. Have mercy on me, O Eternal One, for I languish; heal me, O Eternal One, for my bones shake with terror. My whole being is stricken with terror, while You, Eternal One - O, how long! O Eternal One, turn! Rescue me! Deliver me as befits Your loving kindness.

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי בְּאֶפְךָ תוֹכִיחֵנִי
וְאֶל־בְּחִמָּתְךָ תִּסְרֶנִּי: חַנּוּנֵי יְהוָה כִּי
אֲמַלֵּל אָנֹכִי רַפְּאֵנִי יְהוָה כִּי נִבְהָלוּ
עַצְמֵי: וְנִפְשִׁי נִבְהָלָה מְאֹד וְאַתָּה
יְהוָה עַד־מָתַי: שׁוּבָה יְהוָה חֲלָצָה
נַפְשִׁי הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי לְמַעַן חֲסִדְךָ:

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (C18th)

Let us examine what has happened over the past year. We have sinned...we have committed many faults...we have done wrong. But what about You? There have been earthquakes and harvest failures and droughts. You have created famine and caused disease to flourish. Widows and orphans have multiplied because of You. It seems that You have not done so well either. Let us make a deal. We shall forgive You if You forgive us.

Praying with those who are critically ill or dying

I pray to You for.... who approaches the frontiers of this life. You are the source of life and death and his/her fate it in Your hands. Heal his/her body and restore him/her to life, if this is Your will. If it is not, be with him/her and give him/her courage to conquer pain, and hope to overcome fear. Lead him/her forwards in peace from this world into the life that has no end, supported by his/her own good deeds and accompanied by love.

Prayer dedicated to the victims and survivors of the Indian Ocean tsunami 26.xii.04

*“Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire,
Where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
And the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying;
My throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
With waiting for my God” (Psalm 69.1-3)*

Eternal One, our Rock and our Refuge, You are the source of our trust and our salvation. To you we turn with gratitude and thanksgiving for the blessings in our own lives, but with thoughts and prayers for those whose lives were poured out like water in the tsunami of December 26th 2004. We think of those who died in far off countries and islands around the Indian Ocean, of those who lost all that was precious and dear to them, family, friends, villages, homes and possessions, of those whose lives are now blighted with loss, suffering, disease and poverty and who cry out to You: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck, deliver me for there is no foothold, the flood sweeps over me, I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched, my eyes grow dim” (from Psalm 69:1-3).

O God, do not be far from those who cry out to You: guide us in all that we undertake on their behalf. As You deliver the needy when they call, may we respond with generosity and compassion; as You have pity on the weak and the poor, so may we help save the lives of those in danger, alleviate their suffering and bring hope and help to all those who have survived and must rebuild their lives.

Remember Your Creation O God, how You divided the sea by Your might; and cut openings for springs and torrents; drying up ever-flowing streams. Deliver Your people from suffering, from a life of disease and poverty, for in You shall be our faithfulness and steadfast love: O God our Rock and our salvation.

Some questions to think about:

- 1) What do we mean by the word ‘prayer’? Or in Hebrew תפילה (Tefillah)?
- 2) Why do we pray?
- 3) To whom are we praying?
- 4) For what are we praying?
- 5) Does God hear our prayer? Does God answer our prayer?
- 6) How should we pray?