



unlock your heart

Barrier: Feeling Distant

Okay, so I get that I have to recalibrate my prayer. Tefillah is not just a time to ask and ask, it's a time to acknowledge the Source of everything, a way to bring Hashem into my life, to make a dirah b'tachtonim. But still... I'm left with an uncomfortable feeling.

I have fears and anxieties about what the future will bring. Especially after the tumultuous events of this past year, I don't know that I can rely on just Hashem's love to make life turn out good. Along with the rest of the human race, I've seen my fair share of hester Panim, pain, anguish. To simply relinquish control makes me feel nervous and out of control — what's going to be?

Open Thoughts

Tefillah, we often state, isn't simply about asking and receiving. It's about building a relationship. And relationships are complex. They don't always go smoothly. When we stop and think about it, any meaningful relationship is punctuated by times of closeness — and times of distance.

We've already discussed the *pasuk* that describes that seminal moment before Gan Eden flowered.

"Now no tree of the field was yet on the earth, and no herb of the field grew, because Hashem, Elokim, had not brought rain on the earth and there was no man to work the soil" (Bereishis 2:5).

Adam had not yet turned to Hashem in prayer, and the entire world was waiting.

The Maharzu highlights two words in this *pasuk*: *siach hasadeh*. These words hint to the *avodah* in the Beis Hamikdash. *Siach* is related to *sichah*, speech, or prayer. *Sadeh*, field, is used in the Torah as a synonym for the Makom Hamikdash. This teaches us that the very essence of tefillah is tied up with the concept of the Beis Hamikdash.

It's easy to understand why and how this can be true. After all, the Beis Hamikdash is called *beis tefillah*: house of prayer. It was where the Leviim sang Hallel and the korbanos were offered. But there's more.

Let's read the astounding words of *Yismach Moshe* (haftarah of *parshas Pekudei*): "One of the main impacts of the Beis Hamikdash was for the period after its eventual destruction. For were it not for the impression made by the revelation of the Shechinah there — as it says, the Shechinah does not depart from the Western Wall — we wouldn't be able to exist. Only because even today the Shechinah rests there in an obscured way, as if through a cloud, can Am Yisrael still exist."

The Beis Hamikdash was a meeting place of Klal Yisrael and their Creator. It was a place of relationship. And it was such a powerful demonstration of Hashem's love — of our relationship with Him — that the imprint remains until today. We visit the Kosel, we hang up pictures of it, and hold it in our mind's eye, and in doing so, we hold on to an inner knowledge of Hashem's unconditional love for us.

We don't always feel this love. In fact, we often don't feel this



Part III

love. We live in a *galus* that's not just darkness, but *chasheichah gedolah* — a deep darkness. But there's a testimony of rock and stone that, against the odds, has stood for 2,000 years.

And the Kosel gives us a double message: What looks like a brick wall is a place to reach Him. What might appear to be a barrier — a wall in front of you, rising to the sky — is a place of prayer. What feels like distance, where there's disappointment and fear and confusion — it's part and parcel of the cycle of our relationship, which vacillates between times of distance and times of closeness.

The relationship between Hashem and His people is not static. If that's true for us as a nation, it's true for us as individuals, as well. There are times when it's easy for us to open up, and there are times when we feel distant — even estranged — from our Creator.

What exactly happened when we went to the Beis Hamikdash?

The Torah enjoins the Jewish People to go on a thrice-yearly pilgrimage in order “to be seen” and “to see.” What's the significance

*This looks like a wall, we
can say in our prayers, help
me to turn into a Kosel*



of “being seen”?

One of the deepest needs every person has is to “be seen.” If I am “known” or “seen,” then I exist. My existence — and, therefore, my value — has been confirmed by someone outside of me. We see this play out from infancy, when a baby looks into his mother's eyes and sees her respond to him, gazing and smiling and reinforcing his sense of being in the world. One of the most excruciating experiences a person can have is to feel invisible — as if he's worthless, as if he has no place in the world.

Rabbeinu Yonah (on *Berachos* 85a) tells us that when a person davens, he should imagine he's standing in the Beis Hamikdash. Not only as part of a

nation, but as an individual.

Hashem sees me. My individuality, my circumstances, the way I react, even the way my mind sometimes runs away with me. And that seeing is an act of love. It's a sign that He wants a relationship with me.

Just like in even the best of marriages, there may be times when

OPEN EYES

The two types of mitzvos in the Torah — *aseh* and *lo saaseh* — are two channels through which we can reach Hashem. There's *ahavah* and *yirah*, love and fear, or awe. If I'm standing before Hashem, I can connect by opening one of those two channels.

First, love. Think of a time when you felt wholly and unconditionally loved. Visualize the scene. It could be when you were a child, snuggling on your parent's lap. It could be a moment when a friend saw you, held your hand, and your heart was filled with appreciation and gratitude. Recall it. Make it alive. Let those feelings flood your heart.

Whatever love we may receive from a person, Hashem's love for us is so much greater and vaster and deeper. Think of a time when you experienced Hashem's love. Maybe it was at *hadlakas neiros*. Maybe it was on a quiet stroll in the beautiful countryside. Maybe it was when you were at a simchah of a close family member, and you felt how Hashem had reached down and blown you a kiss.

Before you start Shemoneh Esreh, tap into this love. And if you're not feeling it, if it's hard, if you're angry with Hashem right now, that's fine as well. You can tell Him. You can say, *I'm trying to open myself up to Your love, because I know in my heart that You love me and I've felt it before in my heart. But right now, You feel very distant and it's hard for me.* See what happens when you

open that up to Him.

The second channel is through awe. Visualize a moment when you experienced awe, a glimpse of Hashem's infinite greatness. Maybe it was on Yom Kippur. Maybe when you saw the lightning crack across the sky and were filled with a consciousness of Hashem's power.

Return to the love, feel Hashem holding you. Now return to the awe, feel Hashem's ultimate power and wisdom. Now that both these feelings are alive in you, tefillah looks different.

We stand before Hashem. We pause. We check into what's happening in our hearts. We connect to His loving kindness. And we mentally give over our burdens, both the light and the shadow of our inner worlds.

We take a few minutes to stand in the presence of the only Being Who loves us unconditionally, and Who sees our struggles and our triumphs. Who knows exactly what is hard for us and why. Who is all-powerful and has orchestrated the meandering journey of our lives, not only to take us to a destination, but to a place inside.

Just being in Hashem's Presence, opening ourselves up to His love, dissolves so much of the emotional static that distracts us and drains us. What happens then? We feel a renewed sense of life. Energy. Vitality. And something in our relationship with Hashem feels stronger.

OPEN LIPS

The seforim teach us that all of tefillah corresponds to different parts of the body.

Birchos hashachar is the body — we thank Hashem for our erect posture, for our shoes and clothing and the mitzvos that we do with our body.

Pesukei D'zimra corresponds to our hearts. It's opening up ourselves to Hashem's chesed. The beautiful *pesukim* have us focus on the natural world and the *nissim* that were experienced by Klal Yisrael, and it fills us with love and security.

When we feel secure and lifted up by Hashem's chesed to us, we then come to the moment of truth: We say Shema. Hashem Echad. There is none but Him. His is the only Will that exists, and it's the greatest privilege to serve Him. He is the pillar of my life.

When we've been through this reset, we're ready for Shemoneh Esreh. We're ready to be *omed lifnei HaMelech*, acknowledge our dependence, ask Him for connection.

To say Shemoneh Esreh is to embark on an inner journey. We begin with praise. Then we ask. It's time for us to open our

hearts, to put ourselves in that place where we're ready to receive Hashem's *shefa*.

Then, we thank. We thank even though we have not yet received an answer. We thank even though we have not yet taken leave of the Almighty. We thank because simply standing in prayer, being in the presence of the Creator, being given the privilege to praise and to ask, is already receiving everything.

Modim.

I bow. No longer is my back straight, no longer do I stand tall.

I prostrate myself.

An act of submission.

I have praised and I have asked.

And now I bow in humility, thanking You for whatever will result from this prayer, for I know that Your Will is the ultimate good.

I bow to the inner truth of the world.

I bow to the fact that my specific requests may not be answered, for I recognize that my view is limited.

I bow in thanks, for it is my limitations that enable me to welcome You into my heart.

I pull away, there may be times when I feel confused or shut down. That doesn't mean there's something wrong with the marriage. It means I need to take the time to figure out what's bothering me. To open up about it, honestly and with vulnerability. To daven in a way that's an authentic expression of where we're truly holding. To acknowledge our deep needs: our need for clarity and succor and comfort and guidance. Our need for air and space and energy and enthusiasm. This looks like a wall, we can say in our payers, help me to turn into a Kosel.

The Beis Hamikdash may have been built by Shlomo, but the preparations and foundations were laid by Dovid Hamelech — who, through the course of his tumultuous life, endured the full spectrum of human experiences, left us the gift of his piercing words. "My soul is completely terrified" (Tehillim 6:4); "I am weary with my sighs" (6:7); "Why have You forsaken me?" (22:2); "Innumerable

evils encircled me" (40:13); "My face is covered by humiliation, I have become a stranger to my brothers" (69:8–9).

In every situation, in his joy and in his humiliation, in his closeness and in his distance, Dovid Hamelech found the words — and he bequeathed them to us. He showed us the foundation of the Mikdash — the foundation of the "house of prayer."

Tefillah is a relationship. And relationships have a rhythm — ebbs and flows, times of closeness and times of confusion. To ride these waves, we need to strengthen our commitment to being genuine and honest. To acknowledge where we're holding, to attempt to slowly but surely figure out the source of our feelings, and to commit to take the time and energy to express it, through our words, through the words of the siddur or Tehillim, which will allow us to reengage. We need to slowly but gradually open our hearts, and let in Hashem's light. ☺