

Tefillah Le-Ya'akov: A Prayer for My Autistic Son

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My son, Jacob, is autistic. After his initial diagnosis, it took me several months to begin to come to terms with his condition, to be able to see my child rather than just a diagnostic label, for my love to transcend my pain.

At the same time that I was struggling to regain some emotional balance and strength, the bottom fell out of my prayer life. Accustomed to davvening three times each day, I found that I didn't want to turn to God anymore. When I did pray, it was with little real kavanah. More often, however, I didn't pray at all. Sometimes my silence was the result of anger. Often my silence reflected a depleting lack of energy: as my depression sapped my strength, there was simply nothing left for prayer. Additionally, my inability to pray was an outward sign of anguish, rage, and terror: what kind of future awaited us? Would I ever hear my son speak? Why did this have to happen to Jacob? To me?

Human nature being what it is, I slowly gathered the sparks I needed to re-engage life. Even in my despair, I sought out sources of hope and solace. My energy level did begin to recover over time, assisted by my son's heroic efforts, my wife's endless devotion, and a host of teachers, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, psychologists, neurologists, and more. His good humor, his diligence, and his cheer were infectious. How could I not smile at his glow? How could I not gain strength from his beauty and his joy?

With my spirit on the mend and a newly-reconfigured faith, I sought a way to include Jacob in my prayers. But how? He wasn't sick, since "sickness" is something that comes from outside and for which you seek a cure. Autism doesn't generally result in a cure, and whatever may or may not contribute to its causes, it is internal, a neurological disorder. So asking God to "cure" Jacob doubly missed the point: (1) his autism was part of who he is, and (2) I had to learn to affirm him, autism and all. Jacob doesn't see himself as sick. He sees himself as Jacob. So should I. As he is — autism and all — Jacob is a blessing.

I decided to fashion an insertion in the Amidah, just as Jews do for one who is sick, for a special festival or fast day, for employment, fertility, or prosperity. Since Jacob's disability wasn't sickness awaiting a cure, the "Refa'enu" was hardly appropriate. So, where to put my petition? The prayer that seemed the most conducive for my aspirations was the "Honenu" prayer, one which praises God for the surprising gift of our ability to discern, to think, to understand. It was that capacity that Jacob's autism directly challenged, and in that realm that progress (as distinct from a cure) could happen.

Progress — even incremental progress — would summon vast skill and energy

from Jacob, and it would require understanding, diligence and patience from us, from our extended families, and from his teachers. I needed words to help me focus on the tasks at hand, and on the distant goal. I needed holy words to carry my hopes up to God. I needed Jewish words to strengthen me for the road ahead. So do all parents of special needs children. Indeed, everyone working with children or adults with disabilities could easily adapt the words of my prayer to apply to the individual/s in their care.

The Prayer

יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהי ואלהי אבותי ואמותי, שתשלח מהרה לב נבון וחכם, לשון עדינה ושפת אמת לבן יקר לי, יעקב דב, כי נפשו קשורה בנפש. תן עז, רחמים, וחסד עלינו, על משפחתנו ועל מוריו, שנאמר: חזק ואמץ אל תערץ ואל תחת.

אתה חונן לאדם דעת, ומלמד לאנוש בינה. חננו מאתך דעה, בינה והשכל.

ברוך אתה יי, חונן הדעת.

You graciously favor humans with discernment, and teach people understanding. Grant us of Your discernment, understanding, and insight.

May it be Your will, Adonai my God and God of my fathers and mothers, that you swiftly send a heart discerning and wise, a refined tongue and true speech to my dear son, Ya'akov Dov, with whose soul my own is bound. Grant strength, mercy, and compassion to us, to his family and to his teachers, as it is written: "be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed."

You are bountiful, Adonai, granting discernment.

The Commentary

לב נבון, **a discerning heart**, is found in Proverbs 15:14: "The discerning heart seeks knowledge," and Proverbs 18:15: "The discerning heart acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek out knowledge." Autistic children are so bombarded by sensory information and stimulation that they experience difficulty knowing how to attend to what requires their attention while screening out the rest. Their challenge, like that of snow blindness, is one of too much information, rather

than too little. Jacobs needs to be able to discern what deserves focus and what he must disregard.

נבון והכם, **discerning and wise**, are the traits that Pharaoh seeks in a counselor (Genesis 41:34) and which he finds in Joseph (Genesis 41:39). Joseph was a master at preparing for the future, at fathoming the human heart, and at reconciling the estranged. Jacob, too, will need those skills to live a full life in the future, and he will rely on a circle of caring people to assist him in that task and to share the joys of his future. Being נבון, discerning, alone, is not enough. Jacob needs הכמה, wisdom, to help him accept who he is, with his special strengths and unique challengers. He needs wisdom to persist in learning and growing, and he needs wisdom to continue to love Torah and allow God to be a source of comfort and of strength.

שפט אמת, **true speech**, according to Proverbs 12:19, “abides forever.” “True speech” signifies multiple meanings: Jacob never lies, and in that regard, God has already granted him true speech. But true speech also connotes real speech, the kind of speech that communicates information, feelings, thoughts, and desires. Speech that is true is also certain and reliable; it is available whenever needed. Finally, true speech is speech that allows one’s inner richness to emerge, rather than functioning as a crutch for the disability itself. For many autistic children, the use of speech for droning repetition is both a temptation and a trap. I pray that Jacob may continue to develop a שפט אמת in every sense.

בן יקיר לי, **my dear son**, is from Jeremiah 31:20. This stirring passage carries God’s words of reassurance to Israel that God’s love for us, undiminished. The full citation is “Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, A child that is dandled! Whenever I have turned against him, My thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why My heart yearns for him; I will receive him back in love – declares *Adonai*.” The assurance that a special-needs child is lovable and is loved is of vital importance, embodies the firm conviction that God loves us all. God’s great love is the underpinning of Torah, a consequence of the divine image of every human being.

ונפשו קשורה בנפשו, **with whose soul my own is bound**, is a paraphrase of the poignant words of Judah, explaining just how greatly his father, Jacob, is attached to Benjamin, ונפשו קשורה בנפשו, (Genesis 44:30). Perhaps it is only a parent who knows that incredible, almost painful, intimacy in which one is so connected to another person that the border between one soul and another blurs and disappears. Judah certainly was conscious of that radical connection and vulnerability, as was Jacob. So is every parent of a special-needs child.

חזק ואמץ, **be strong and resolute**. Nine times the Tanakh relays the admonition to be strong and resolute, urging it on the Israelites in the conquest of the Land of Israel, and on the Jews in persisting with the observance of the Torah. It is what David urges on his son, Solomon, as Solomon prepares to become king. Our quotation is from Joshua 1:9. The full citation, in which

God addresses Joshua, is “I charge you: Be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed, for *Adonai* your God is with you wherever you go.” This seems to me to be exactly what everyone should know in working with special-needs children: we are not alone, and hope is itself a powerful tool in allowing the child to blossom and grow. Rather than allowing the terrors of an imagined future to cripple the present, I see this verse as encouragement that each challenge can be met, and that God will provide the resources of heart and soul to help us walk each step of the way.

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