

# Walk thru Davening

*with Rabbi David Walk*

## Why Pray?

There are many people who claim that they never pray. I don't believe them. Many years ago, I was an irresponsible teenager who decided to become an Orthodox Jew with many wonderful friends who thought that I was crazy. Part of their critique of my new lifestyle was the fact that, to their thinking, I was davening 'all the time'. They all insisted vigorously that they never, ever prayed. However, one December morning while driving on an icy road (US Route 3, Plymouth, NH) we got into a skid. With the car slowly sliding into a gas station, two of my 'I never pray' buddies were chanting with great devotion, 'O, God, I don't want to die. Please, God, don't let me die!'

Okay, most of us don't spend much time in slow motion car accidents, but still a lot of people pray. Why? Generally, I believe most people pray, because they believe it works. There are many studies which show that people who pray regularly live longer and have happier lives. I'm skeptical. It may just mean that the people who pray are the type who live longer and are happier. So, I don't really know why most people pray. As an

Orthodox Jew, I pray because it's obligatory, but does the story end there?

According to the Midrash, there are ten terms for prayer: (1) prayer, (2) beseeching, (3) call, (4) cry, (5) outcry, (6) chant, (7) encounter, (8) falling, (9) sing, and (10) stand. Actually, there are more, like 'converse', 'ask' or 'recite'. The point is that our Sages recognized that there are many reasons why people pray, and each term for prayer can represent another motivation for TEFILA.

However, the two greatest Jewish religious thinkers of the twentieth century, Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik both wrote that there are really only two reasons to pray, even though they express it differently. Rav Kook wrote that we can divide the reasons for our modern praying into the mystical and rational. In the rational realm, we find Torah obligations based on historical, objective obligations to interact with God, because we have intellectually concluded that there is a Supreme Being, to Whom we owe obeisance.

This commitment began as KORBANOT (offerings) in the Temple. We continue those obligations through our public recitations of the SHMONEH ESREI (the AMIDA) prayer.

This reality is most noticeable on Shabbat, Chag and Rosh Chodesh in the MUSAF service, when we actually recite the verses about the offerings. But our weekday morning and afternoon SHMONEH ESREI prayers are in place of the daily offerings (TAMID offerings).

The less objective or spiritual approach to prayer is expressed in our silent SHMONEH ESREH, when we are allowed or even encouraged to interject personal requests and thoughts. This is our time with God. Our Patriarchs did this when they invented the morning (Avraham), afternoon (Yitzchak) and evening services (Ya'akov). Even though now there's a script, we must do everything in our power to make this a conversation. Those blessings which our Sages composed are guidance for these visits.

The Rav said that the material our Sages wrote for us means that we don't have to primarily 'need to say what we feel; we are required to feel what we say'. We should work hard to understand what our Sages composed, because they are guiding us in this encounter with our Maker. We should pour our souls into this endeavor.

This is hard. We feel the obligation to say the prayers but often don't feel

that the process is working. Rav Soloveitchik once observed that many of us 'don't want to daven; we want to have davened'. It's a conundrum. I feel this often. There are days when I have trouble remembering my morning davening experience, and that's not a sign of significant involvement in the process. It's something to work on, for me and for everyone.

Rav Steinzaltz z"l was once approached by a young observant man who taught Torah. This individual divulged that he had 'become distant or disconnected from the prayer service'. Rav Steinzaltz suggested that the young man 'wrestle' with one sentence of one prayer: Grapple with that one sentence, and say it with intention (KAVANA). That will change the whole day that lies before you.

That's the point of why I'm starting this new series of articles on T'FILA. To daven better, it's important to try to understand our prayers. Then we can follow Rav Steinzaltz's advice. Together, let's find that one sentence which will make our prayers more meaningful, then our day, then our life. 