

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. 

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The Evolution of Prayer

Shmoneh Esrei - part 1

Our people have been praying since Avraham Avinu. The Avot are credited with 'inventing' SHACHARIT when the sun rises, MINCHA as it sets, and ARVIT during the distressing darkness. But what did they say? Except for a few snippets scattered throughout Tanach, we don't know what they shared with God during these encounters. Rambam explained 'that every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer' (Laws of Prayer 1:2). He goes on to explain that this process should include praises, requests and thanksgiving. But through tribulations and exile people lost the focus or clarity to accomplish this task on their own without guidance. So, during the time of Ezra, the Men of the Great Assembly composed the Shmoneh Esrei prayer. My first articles on Jewish prayer will focus on this master work of liturgical composition.

The most remarkable aspect of this prayer's design is its flexibility. The introductory material of praises for God and the concluding section of

thanksgiving vary only very slightly throughout the year. However, the middle part is always dedicated to the purpose of this particular prayerful encounter with God. Generally, the goal of the prayer is supplication to God for the needs of both the individual and the community. This petitionary text of thirteen blessings is exchanged on Shabbat and Chag for a single blessing which expresses the sanctity or special nature of the day.

On those days upon which the Torah (Bamidbar chapters 28 & 29) decreed a MUSAF (additional offering) in the Beit HaMikdash, we have a Musaf prayer. This iteration of our basic prayer format has one blessing in the middle which is based upon that day's special additional offering. It's these prayers which remind us of the dual nature of our davening. These prayers continue the obligation of daily prayer begun by the Patriarchs, but also are formatted to remind us of our presently abandoned offerings in the Beit HaMikdash.

Before we begin our analysis of the text of the Shmoneh Esrei, I think that it's important to note three innovations that our Sages thought important enough to impose upon those reciting their master prayer. The first is to stand with our feet

together. This obligation to be on our feet gives our prayer its most popular name, the AMIDA - the Standing Prayer. Our Sages based this custom on the angels who are described as 'standing upon a single leg' (Yechezkel 1:7), in the famous passage about God's Divine Throne, the MERKAVA.

Rav Kook uses this custom to explain that we have two great services to God. One is Torah study, and is described by the term HALACHA - movement. Torah study and its resulting legal observances are a work of persistent progress. We are expected to always move forward both individually and communally. Communally, we must always allow HALACHA to evolve and remain relevant no matter what innovations appear in contemporary society. Individually, every one of us is required to study and develop so that we are always reinventing ourselves as we mature and age. HALACHA is always a work in progress.

Prayer, on the hand, is a statement of where we are at the given moment that any prayer is recited. Prayer is sort of in a stasis. Today I stand before God and try to describe my situation and needs, at that moment in my spiritual journey. Sharing that information is a major part of what I

communicate in my attempt to contact the Infinite.

The second rabbinic innovation is to face Yerushalayim, or if one is privileged to be in the Holy City, then to turn towards the Temple Mount. This wrinkle in our daily devotion adds two dimensions to our attempt to communicate with God. First, it gives the individual supplicant a sense of national unity. All the world's Jews are focusing on the same point. This adds a new dimension to our communication with our Maker. We are not alone. I'm a small part of a much greater effort.

Turning towards the place of the once and future Beit HaMikdash, also reminds us that our prayers are, in part, a replacement for the Temple offerings. It also calls attention to the fact that we believe that Yerushalayim is the interface between this world and the heavenly realm. All of our prayers travel to the Divine Throne via the Temple Mount. Zionism unites us politically, nationally and spiritually.

The third addition instituted by our Sages to help us daven better is to begin our Shmoneh Esrei with the verse: O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise (T'hilim 51:17). This plea reminds of an extremely important reality: Daven-

ing is very difficult! It's so hard to communicate with God that Divine support is required. It's almost a chutzpa to address our Creator. We seek permission for this possible impertinence.

Rebbe Nachman points out the numerical value (GEMATRIA) of HEICHAL, God's divine palace, 65, is also the value of the first word in our verse ADONAI. One requires the permission of the BA'AL HaBAYIT to receive the honor of visiting God's Sanctum. As God's servants we need the Master's indulgence to enter the Divine presence. This verse reminds us of the WOW factor involved when entering God's presence. Humility is required for this enterprise.

So, now we're ready to open our mouths in prayer, praise, supplication. In the following articles, I'll try to make our Sages' wonderful Shmoneh Esrei prayer come to life. I hope that I'm equal to the task. 