

# מה שתשיב

www.mahshetashiv.com

בס"ד

## **It is not easy to learn to pray but worth making the effort**

When we pray from the siddur, we bond with the hearts and souls of those who came before us

---

One of my happiest memories as a child was sitting with my father in shul while we followed the service together. It took me time to learn; prayer is a challenging concept to understand and explain. Furthermore, many of us find Hebrew difficult. Before the pandemic, communities would seek creative ways of encouraging their members to attend shul on Shabbat, such as special kiddushim, Shabbat lunch speakers and innovative programming for families. But all too often, these ingenious and worthwhile occasions did little to encourage the masses to return merely to pray.

Nonetheless, prayer is fundamental to Jewish observance. The fact that it is not understood by many Jews should be seen by any responsible educator or Jewish synagogal body as an opportunity to teach and encourage growth. Many United Synagogue communities offer explanatory services, especially during Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur. On occasion I have led classes as an alternative to the Shabbat service which focussed on the meditative aspects of prayer, choosing one central prayer, explaining the meaning, and then leading those present to recite it word for word together. The experience was transformational.

Yet there are deeper, theological questions that many people struggle with. What does prayer actually achieve? Is God really listening? If God loves us and is all-knowing and all-powerful, He surely knows our needs, has the capacity to fulfil them and wants to, given his eternal love. Why then does He need me to pray to Him? If He has decided not to grant me my desires, what use is prayer?

To address this, the late Rosh Yeshiva of Kerem B'Yavneh, Rabbi Chaim Goldvicht (1924-1994) draws on the creation story following the sin of Adam and Eve and compares the punishments given by God to Adam with those given to the snake. While Adam is told "by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread until you return to the ground", the snake must "eat the dust of the earth" all its life (Genesis 3). Whereas man must toil for his food, the Talmud (Yoma 75a) notes that by being made to eat dust, God seems to have been kind to the snake, for its food can be found wherever it goes.

However, Rabbi Goldvicht argues that this truly is a curse because the fact that the snake's needs are always provided for renders its relationship with God redundant. With no shortage of physical sustenance, the snake has no need to turn to its creator. Conversely, Adam is ejected from paradise and thrust into the cold, uncaring world outside where his most basic needs must be gained through a lifetime of hard labour, with no guarantee of success. Nonetheless, the consequence of humanity's dependence on God is the opportunity for each individual to build and nurture a personal relationship with their Creator.

This dependency is highlighted when God describes us as His children (Deuteronomy 14:1). Parents are much older and wiser than their children. Should a child ask for something the parent knows would be harmful, a loving parent must say no. From the child's perspective, that "no" seems cruel, disappointing, and illogical. But the parent knows best.

So too, in the words of Isaiah (55:8) referring to God, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” But this does not mean that we shouldn’t ask, for the very act of asking emphasises and nurtures the natural bond between parent and child.

Our biblical heroes all prayed. The Talmud (Brachot 26b) relates that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob instituted the morning, afternoon, and evening services respectively. Hannah prayed to God for a son at the Mishkan, the Tabernacle in Shilo. So much of our siddur is comprised of King David’s Psalms. The Men of the Great Assembly formulated the structure of our daily services so that post-Temple we could build synagogues for prayer across the world. And while in exile, our ancestors who suffered terrible persecution composed the most heartfelt supplications, such as the long tachanun prayer attributed to the Jewish community in 7th century Spain who suffered terrible persecution at the hands of the Visigoths, now immortalised in our prayerbooks.

We can pray to God in our own way, with our own words and in our own language. But when we pray from a siddur, we are bonding with the hearts and souls of our forebears who poured out their hearts like water to God, and whose faith and tenacious struggle for survival ensured the possibility of our very existence many generations later.

Attaining a spiritual experience through prayer is not easy; one must learn how to pray. But it is worth it. Concentration in prayer is considered one of the great mitzvot which reaps blessing in this world and the next (Talmud Shabbat 127a). While it takes effort and grit, we are blessed with many opportunities. Prayer may be challenging but it calls us to aspire to spiritual greatness, and a lifetime of learning and devotion.

A version of this article first appeared in Jewish Chronicle on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

If you have enjoyed this article and would like to donate to help the Mah Shetashiv team, please use your smartphone to scan the QR code, or visit our website at:

<https://mahshetashiv.com/donate-to-mah-shetashiv/>

© Mah Shetashiv 2023

