



Week 3: Tefillah (Prayer) Deep Dive Reading

Prayer is at once childlike in its simplicity and profound beyond description. But that begs a question: How can I relate to prayer in a meaningful way, in a way I feel comfortable with. I do feel that there is something out there -- call it God, the Force, or whatever you want -- and I do want to connect with whatever that something is. I just don't want to be left feeling like some strange religious fanatic in the process. -Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, introduction to chapter 12, *Rosh HaShanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit*.

Rabbi Apisdorf offers “six perspectives on prayer,” which he says are by no means exhaustive. See if you find anything that resonates for you in these excerpts from each one, then we will consider how they may relate to the personal inventories we’ve created in the last week:

- **Self Inquiry:** The Hebrew word for prayer is a reflexive verb (*lehitpalel*), which means to examine or judge oneself, our attitudes and actions. From this perspective, prayer is a private encounter with ourselves in the presence of God. Choose or two concepts to focus on each time you pray, or you can choose them as the prayer service progresses. In either case, the idea is quality and not quantity. The process may not be easy or comfortable, but self-assessment is never easy.
- **An Instrument for Change:** Judaism sees life as a steady stream of opportunities for learning, growing, and changing. This conscious engagement of these opportunities is known as *tikkun ha-middot*, or the constant refinement of the human character, which comes through ever-increasing self-awareness. At the same time, our sages teach us that “all beginnings are difficult,” and the possibility for achieving growth is daunted most by a lack of commitment along the path. A prayer practice can reinforce our commitment to the values we speak when we pray.
- **Talking to God:** $E=MC^2$ is a relatively simple equation. It is also one of the most penetrating notions to ever occupy the human mind. Prayer is also quite simple. God is here and you can speak to Him. That’s all there is to it. No tricks, no intermediaries, just

talk. Is there anything more simple or magnificent? But there is part of us that is afraid. “What if I speak to Him and I *do* feel a presence?” Or perhaps you just feel sort of, well, weird. That all makes sense. God is waiting to hear our voices. The words and language really don’t matter to Him. Like anything else prayer will take practice and patience, but in the end there is nothing more sublime than speaking to God.

- **Your Inner Life:** We lead two lives: the outer and the inner, one public, one private. It is essential that there be a part of your life that is secluded and private: a chamber within your heart to retreat, to contemplate, to talk to God or just to hear yourself breathe. Rabbi Shlomo Volbe describes prayer as “sudden quietness.” It is a rite of visitation to a very private place in your heart, and it is from there that your equilibrium will flow. The moments we spend in prayer allow us to take refuge from the dissonance of our outer life and reacquaint ourselves with a peaceful inner core.
- **Being Connected to the Jewish People:** The bulk of our prayers, in fact the entire *Amidah* [standing prayer], are in the plural. We are one people and one family inexorably bound together. Each of us possesses an identity that reaches far beyond our individual selves. We are each a living cell in a body that is three thousand years young. We pray in the plural because we exist in our fellow Jews, and they exist in us.
- **Tuning into the Cosmos:** There is a fantastically expensive Jewish idea that says that the tools that God used for creating our universe were the very letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In fact, the very first thing that God created were letters, and then He used them to construct the rest of existence. Hebrew is a multi-layered superstructure containing limitless nuances, each reflecting a different dimension of insight. Each letter has numerous levels of meaning. Letters and words are far more than symbolic images and sounds. Each letter is a living organism, containing hidden meanings and capabilities as well. The authors of our prayers used letters and words to attune our souls and connect us to Godliness, to direct and connect our souls in ways we are unaware.
 - **Resources:** Judaism is clear that a person can pray in any language. However, some dimensions of the prayer experience don’t translate from the original Hebrew. Learning to say, as a start, the *Shema*, can be a meaningful starting point to tap into this prayer perspective. Look at [THIS VIDEO](#) to learn!

Applying this Reading: Reviewing Our Inventory

This week we use our readings about Tefillah/ Prayer to review the Personal Inventory you created in [Week Two](#) of the Personal Practice Guide (you can always go back and do that now. We’ll wait for you!).

The excerpts from Rabbi Apisdorf’s book focus on the communal prayer that occurs at Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur services, but they can apply to personal, private prayer as well. In reviewing his offered “perspectives,” choose one or more that speak to you, and use them to meditate on the inventory for doing *teshuvah* that you created last week. Maybe one perspective on prayer will work better for a certain person you need to sort out an apology for than another. Perhaps another prayer stance will be fertile ground for the self-reflection you need to change old habits, and gain the commitment to make that change “stick” into the coming year and beyond. Here’s what to do:

a. **Write these initial ideas down:** a prayer perspective for each person or situation you are addressing in your Inventory during this High Holy Day season. You will use this in the coming weeks to continue your work.

b. **Dive in! For those new to regular prayer practice:** Set aside 5-10 minutes (or more) at the same time each day to tune into prayer. As Apisdorf notes, it's ok if it feels awkward. For now, just try it for a week. Start applying your prayer perspectives to your Inventory, and take notes after each session, so you can look back on your progress. Note how you feel about your prayer each day. After a few days, do you notice any changes from your initial feelings?

-OR-

For those with an existing prayer practice: find something new in your routine -- some nuance in the words you use, or try considering a new prayer perspective from above that you normally don't consider when you regularly pray.

For everyone, regardless of level of experience with prayer, a regular practice keep us "spiritually fit" for moments of transcendence that occur from time to time. The more we put into our prayer on a regular basis, the more nuance and meaning we can experience in those moments that blow us away!

Further Reading:

- **High Holy Day Prayer Book:** This is a great time to begin to read some of the prayers and meditations in the High Holy Day *machzor* (prayer book). You can look at an online "look book" on our main [CBB High Holy Day page](#), and even order your own physical copies if you're so inspired. (Scroll down to "HHD Prayer Book Information.")
- **PSALM 27** is traditionally used for prayer and meditation during the month of Elul. Read Psalm 27 and how it reflects our own maturing relationship with God, in this article: "[A Faith that Includes Doubt.](#)"
- **Create a space for prayer:** Try this guide to [making your own sacred space](#) with a home altar.
- **One More Perspective:** In *God in Search of Man*, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that regular prayer practice prepares us, keeping us attuned to wonder, for the infrequent but transcendent "revelations" we encounter throughout our lives... Read more! You can order this book online through [Chaucer's Books](#), or on [Amazon](#).