

PRAYING with Fire

PRAYER POINTS

PRAYING WITH PURITY

Purity has the power to transform prayer into a focused, uplifting experience. Here are a few simple tools. By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The concept of purity is not only for the devoutly righteous and Ivory soap. Understanding what purity means will help enhance your praying ability and experience.

When it comes to prayer, purity means a few things. First and foremost, it means complete concentration on the prayer, and, more importantly, to WHOM the prayer is addressed. The heart is capable of feeling more than one thing, but not all at the same time. A divided heart means divided concentration, and it is the quality of concentration that dictates how much we are "there" for what we are doing.

Memory seems to work this way. If what we are experiencing is exciting and stimulating, it will draw us in, make it easy for us to focus on what we are doing, and, unify us with the experience. The more our heart and mind are involved in what we are presently doing, the more what we are doing will leave an impression on us and the better we will remember it.

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In fact, the heart and mind are so powerful that they can create a world in our mind that ignores the existing state of reality that encompasses us, even stimulating emotions and feelings. For example, someone sitting in a dentist's chair can intellectually and emotionally transport himself to more pleasant surroundings simply by concentrating on a more pleasant experience.

This, of course, is what meditation is all about. Quality of life depends very much upon one's mind control, because, it allows one to remain focused on the moments of life that seem

to be so fleeting. Quality of prayer depends upon this too, because, it allows one to be "there" while praying, both in mind and spirit.

TOOLS TO HELP CONCENTRATION

1. Verbally declare to yourself, "I WANT to pray now. Other issues are important to me, but, it is COUNTERPRODUCTIVE to consider them now while in a state of prayer." Saying this allows you to become clear about your goal and priority of praying, and makes it easier to push interfering thoughts away when they intrude.
2. If some idea pops up during an inopportune moment, don't panic or get upset. Nothing ruins your concentration more than negative emotions. Instead, calmly saying to yourself (in your mind), "Not now. They'll be time to think about this later. Right now, I want to pray and only pray." The idea usually passes.
3. While saying a word, or phrase, stop to ask yourself in your mind, "What does this mean? Why is this important to me ... to the Jewish people ... to the world?"
4. In your personal *Siddur*, write one to two words that will focus you when you arrive at each individual prayer.

The second aspect of purity when it comes to prayer is self-perception. I remember when I was learning to pray, how difficult it was to see myself as someone who prays to God. Prayer seemed to be such a righteous and pure experience (after all, you ARE talking to God!), and I did not feel my life reflected that privilege enough. It was like wearing someone else's "clothing".

Wanting to pray and working on improving my ability to pray has resulted for me in spiritual growth and character refinement. As I became more observant, my perception of myself as a person who prays became enhanced, and less foreign, making prayer time far more "natural."

Something else I did once also helped the situation.

While traveling, I was forced to have to pray on my own, and without a *minyan*. In a strange environment, I was having difficulty concentrating on the words. I felt little desire to pray, and lots of desire to speed up and be done with it already.

However, a little voice inside said, "It's bad enough you have to pray on your own and away from synagogue, and now you want to dismiss God so fast?"

But, what could I do?

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I don't know why I did this, but I began to become very animated during each blessing, using my hands and making gestures that indicated sincerity. For example, when asking for things, I put my hands together and acted out the part of a sincere beggar (without moving my feet, that is). When praying on behalf of the Jewish people, I spread my hands out to heaven like a person reaching up for Divine help.

Different blessings meant different postures, and each prompted its own emotional response. In the end, not only did I not rush through my prayer, but, I had felt totally "there," exhilarated, and in touch with God and Jewish destiny. Even today, when I can't do such gesturing (for fear of scaring everybody else in the synagogue), I still imagine doing it, and it greatly affects my self-perception as one who prays, and helps me to feel more sincere about the goals of prayer and the Jewish people.

1 Kings 8:46 "When they sin against You -- for there is no man who does not sin -- and You are angry with them and deliver them to the enemy, and their captors carry them off to an enemy land, near or far; ⁴⁷ and then they take it to heart in the land to which they have been carried off, and they repent and make supplication to You in the land of their captors, saying: 'We have sinned, we have acted perversely, we have acted wickedly,' ⁴⁸ and they turn back to You with all their heart and soul, in the land of the enemies who have carried them off, and they pray to You in the direction of their land which You gave to their fathers, of the city which You have chosen, and of the House which I have built to Your name -- ⁴⁹ oh, give heed in Your heavenly abode to their prayer and supplication, uphold their cause, ⁵⁰ and pardon Your people who have sinned against You for all the transgressions that they have committed against You. Grant them mercy in the sight of their captors that they may be merciful to them. ⁵¹ For they are Your very own people that You freed from Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace. ⁵² May Your eyes be open to the supplication of Your servant and the supplication of Your people Israel, and may You heed them whenever they call upon You. ⁵³ For You, O Lord GOD, have set them apart for Yourself from all the peoples of the earth as Your very own, as You promised through Moses Your servant when You freed our fathers from Egypt." (TNK)