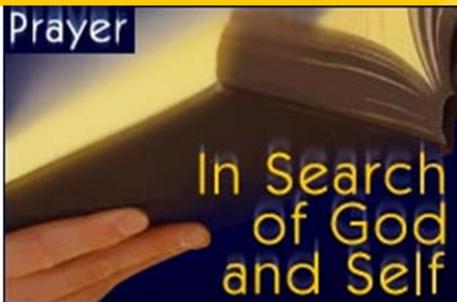


PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



In Search of God and Self

Jul 29, 2000 | by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Does prayer seem like a meaningless chore? Here is a fresh look at prayer and what it can do for you.

For many Jews, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, means lots of hours in synagogue praying. *Lots.*

It's not the amount of time spent praying that bothers people; many people gladly spend an entire day consumed by a single activity -- if what they are doing is meaningful to them and therefore, enjoyable. The problem is standing there for many hours on end, often in an uncomfortable position, unable to connect with the opportunity of the day.

The synagogue experience doesn't have to be this way. Anyone who can master the prayer opportunity of "The Days of Awe" can transform their prayers into meaningful accomplishments all year round. Understanding the "art" of prayer means using *tefillah*, "prayer," as a means for God-discovery, and self-discovery.

WHAT DOES GOD WANT FROM ME?

At first, this sounds like a simple question. However, it is really another way of asking, "What is the purpose of creation?" -- a more complex question -- because, what God wants from us is to fulfill the purpose of creation.

According to tradition, the purpose of creation is to develop and maintain a relationship with God, and everything we do in life -- EVERYTHING -- comes down to this idea. In other words, God wants ME, or rather, US. He wants a relationship.

What does this mean? Well, if we learn from our own relationships, then it becomes easy to see why this is so true and so important. For, there are many things we do for other people, and many things they do for us. The more we love someone, the more we tend to do for that person.

"A LABOR OF LOVE" IS JUST THAT: DIFFICULT WORK MADE EASIER BECAUSE OF THE LOVE IT EXPRESSES.

However, all that we do (and put up with) are just different ways of expressing our understanding of the person's importance to us, and how we feel about him or her. "A labor of love" is just that: labor -- i.e., difficult work -- made easier because of the love it expresses to the one for whom we are doing it. It is "self" that we give to others whom we love, and in whom we trust. There is no greater gift of love than this.

It is no different with God. In fact, it is even more so with God. He made man and this awesome universe, which we find ourselves enjoying, just to facilitate a relationship between us and Him. He gave us life and that which supports it to begin the relationship. We are supposed to give Him ourselves to complete that relationship.

It is not our obedience that God desires. It is our love and appreciation that God requests from us. Our obedience follows from this, and expresses that love and appreciation, like it does in any relationship. This is part one of any prayer experience: giving of one's self.

HOW DOES PRAYER DO THIS?

Let's try a little experiment. Imagine for a moment that you are psychic. Now, imagine that you are able to communicate with loved ones many miles away through your mind though with much effort. For example, your mind must be clear of any outside interference and distraction (which, in daily life, is not so easy to do) before you can even "reach out and touch someone."

But, you can't afford to fail, because you have life-saving information, and the person at the other end is not near a phone line through which you can reach them. Concentration and single-mindedness are obviously the name of the game and the key to success here.

Now, close your eyes, use your imagination, and try it.

THE GOAL OF PRAYER IS TO USE YOUR MIND TO RISE ABOVE THE NEEDS OF THE BODY, ON A JOURNEY TOWARD GOD.

It's not easy, is it? But, it is also exhilarating as well. In fact, if you take this experiment seriously, and add dimensions such as trying to "feel" the person's presence with your mind, you can become so absorbed in what you are doing that you will lose track of time. Until, that is, you tire so much that

you are forced to stop. For some people, that could be over an hour later after beginning their own personal *Shmoneh Esrei*[the central silent prayer].

This is the "art of prayer." During the prayer service, the goal is to use your mind to rise above the needs of the body, on a journey toward God. With feet on the ground, your mind is soaring toward the clouds, and beyond, into a higher spiritual realm. On such a spiritual plane, life seems to be timeless.

As one person put it, "Prayer is the time I peel off the layers of my life that complicate my personality and confuse my emotions. I even imagine myself actually peeling off layers of 'shtik,' until all that remains behind is the essential me. At that point, I find it very easy to focus on God and to feel His Presence, which is the highlight of my day!"

This is why, the rabbis explain, the Hebrew verb "to pray," *l'hitpallel*, is reflexive -- to indicate how prayer is supposed to act as way to reflect our true selves. That experience alone allows prayer to give one's self over to God, or, at least to make it available.