

Putting Heart into the Words of the Siddur

In chapter 5, we considered the problem of how to put heart into our own words. Here we consider the difficult question of how to put heart into someone else's words, the words of the Jewish liturgical tradition.

Reading words on a page in order to pray is different from ordinary reading.

If I tell you to read the *Amidah* silently, you'll read it like Evelyn Wood speed-reading dynamics at two thousand words a minute with 90 percent comprehension. What you will discover after a page or two is that you're reading to get information and there's no new information in the Siddur. So the first thing you have to say to people is that reading prayers is not reading to get information.

RABBI LAWRENCE KUSHNER

Rather, an entirely different kind of reading is required. The movement from outside in, the transfer of cognitive meanings from the page to our minds, is important. Prayers for peace or redemption or gratitude must be understood as such if they are going to move us toward their intended targets. But this is just the beginning of the story. (Too often, prayer is unsatisfying because it is the end.)

The printed words succeed as prayer when they evoke our inner desires and then move those yearnings outward—to other beings, to the world, to God. Liturgical prayer, then, is meant to be a dialogue. The reading needs to be reflexive; the meanings of the words run simultaneously in different directions. When I pray “Grant us peace . . .” the same words that are meant to arouse the desire for peace in my heart also carry my prayer for peace out into the world.

While this sounds more complicated than it really is, it is critical to acknowledge that the dialogical nature of traditional prayer makes demands on us. We must bring effort, intention, and a set of attitudes to the task. If we are disinterested rather than curious,

if we are distracted rather than attentive, if we read with our minds to the exclusion of our hearts, the Siddur cannot do its job and work its magic. Reading a prayer requires deep listening—to the words and to our hearts. This, too, is a skill we learn over time as part of a prayer practice.

Earlier we discussed chant and other meditative techniques for working with Hebrew phrases. We also learned in chapter 13 that sometimes there is no difference between our words and the tradition's words. Here are more techniques for making the tradition's words our own.

Read It as Poetry

People don't know how to use poetry, so they approach the Siddur as though it's a shopping list. So either you bought the tomatoes or you didn't. Either you like red peppers or you don't. If you read the prayer book as if it's a list of facts, then it's really, really, really problematic. But if you read it as poetry, I think it's provocative and profound and connecting.

RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON

Linger with a Phrase That Touches You

Over and over again, our teachers repeated a simple, basic technique. Don't rush, and when a word or phrase grabs your attention, stay with it.

Find a prayer that really opens your heart. It may be just one line from a prayer. And give yourself permission to dwell on that prayer. Don't feel like volume is so important; feel like depth is important. It's not getting through the prayer book. It's not even getting through the prayer. You're looking for the words that are going to spring the hatch on your heart.

RABBI TIRZAH FIRESTONE

I move through the prayers like mantras until one of them hooks me, and when it does, I linger there. I remember what Simon Greenberg used to say, that he would allow himself to find, each day, something in the prayers that meant something to him, and he didn't care if he didn't get to the end. Like the old story of the man who says to the rabbi, "I've been through the Talmud three times," and the rabbi says, "How much of the Talmud has been through you?" The same thing with prayers.

RABBI DAVID J. WOLPE

So I have this map, the prayer book, and I might choose one day to just go to one little spot on the map and hang out there, and other days, I want to go through the whole trajectory, usually depending on how much time I have.

RABBI DIANE ELLIOT

I learned an important practice from Rabbi Karen Fox. The prelude to the *Amidah*, as we learned in the previous chapter, is a line from Psalms, *Adonai sefatai tiftach*, "Please God, open my lips..." I repeat it, one time or ten, until I am focused and ready to continue. Only then do I start the *Amidah*. Here is another practice from Rabbi Fox.

Sometimes during the *Amidah*, I'll just take *shema koleinu*, [hear our voice], and repeat it over and over, until my prayer is done. What made me angry was that I couldn't find enough time in the service. Now I take the time.

RABBI KAREN FOX, DD

For most people, it helps to *do* less and *be* more. The very experience of staying present, open, and attentive is a kind of prayer. Sit quietly and enjoy God's presence. Connect with a single word. *Shema* (listen) from the *Shema Yisrael* declaration, *Modeh* (I am grateful) from the *Modeh Ani* prayer, or *Nishmat* from *Nishmat Kol Chai* (soul/breath of all life) are all

good starting points. The essential prayer of those wishing to pray is: “May my prayer be enough.” The unspoken prayer behind it is: “May my *being* be enough.” By God’s grace, it is.

RABBI DEBRA ORENSTEIN

Focus on the Words

Ultimately, however, there is no avoiding the simplest method of all, bringing our hearts to bear on the words in the Siddur by taking them seriously.

Praying goes particularly well for me when I am not just trying to rush and keep up with the pace of the people praying around me. Rather, when I slow down and look at the Siddur before me almost the same way you look at an optical chart at the optometrist, when you relax your eyes and try to see which word or symbol hovers just over the page. Often a word seems to hover based on whatever I am experiencing in my life at the time. The Hebrew word for “purity” might stand out, or the word for “peace.” I then concentrate on this word, on this concept that is reaching out to me. Even as my lips are singing prayers, my heart and mind are savoring this word until it adheres itself to me, weaves its way into me and becomes a part of me.

RABBI ZOË KLEIN

When I say *modah* (thankful), I connect with my sense of gratitude, then *ani* (I), my sense of selfhood, *I’m* the one that’s saying this prayer. Then *lefanecha* (before You), and suddenly, it’s not about me, it’s about You, God, the One in whose Presence I am. And so on. I’ll go through each prayer like that and that’s how my heart is able to connect. It’s coming from inside me. It’s not intellectual. I embody the prayer. I allow myself to say, then really experience, gratitude.

RABBI ZARI M. WEISS