

Elul WhatsApp / Telegram Messages

11th Elul – 11th September

Somebody asked me for three ways to enhance their *tefillah* (prayers). How can you make your experience of prayer deeper and more dynamic? I would say the following.

Number one, find out what is going on in the *tefillah*. What actually is prayer? What is a particular prayer all about? That really, really is important. Otherwise you're watching a film without knowing the plot, you're listening to music and you have an opera and you don't understand what's going on. You really need to understand what is going on in this prayer and that is, and excuse the self-advertisement here, that's why I wrote the introductions to the siddur and to the *machzorim* (festival prayer books) because I discovered that actually there are very few places where people explain to you what's going on in prayer.

So, if you've read my introduction, for instance, you will know that there's a very important movement during shacharit. The whole of shacharit consists of three movements: creation, revelation, redemption. God as He is in the universe. God as He is in the Torah in His commands and His words. And God as He acts in history and asks us to act in history to bring about a world of justice and compassion. I've also explained that that's a little like Jacob's dream of the angels and the ladder. The angels ascending and descending.

There are three movements in prayer. Number one, *pesukei d'zimra* where we start off at ground level and climb the ladder towards heaven. Then beginning with *baruchu* until the end of the *amidah* or the end of *tachanun*, we are standing or sitting in the Divine presence itself. We're up there in heaven with the angels, in direct contact with God. And finally, after the *amidah*, beginning with *ashrei* and culminating *u'va l'zion* and *aleinu* with redemption. We're coming down the ladder again from heaven to earth. Understand the musical structure or the intellectual structure of prayer and then you'll get a much better sense of what is going on.

Number two, ask yourself a good question. Whatever the question is about the *tefillah*. Why is the first request of ours on a week day *amidah* “*ata chonein l'adam da'at*”? Why is the first thing we ask for knowledge, intellectual virtues? Try and work out what that is saying about Jewish spirituality. Or ask yourself why at the end of every *amidah* do we say “*elokai netzor l'shonei meira*”? We ask God, please help us not talk *lashon harah*, talk badly about other people? Now, why do we say that in our prayers as the conclusion of the *amidah*? Or look at the *aleinu*.

Look at the difference between paragraph one and paragraph two. Why is paragraph one so particularistic? Why is paragraph two so universalistic? In other words, go through the *tefillah* and each day if you can find yourself asking, now why do we do that? And search for the answer. You'll find the answer eventually but that process of asking the question will set in motion a deepening of your experience of prayer.

Finally, number three, be aware that it's not always possible to get the full dramatic emotion of prayer. Certainly not on a weekday and therefore, look on weekday prayer as a little like an orchestral rehearsal. You're not getting the full emotion of the whole thing until Shabbat or until Yom Tov, but nonetheless you're preparing for it and you're making a big difference to prayer and to your understanding of prayer, but don't expect the full emotional drama to be there as it will be on the opening night come Shabbat, come Yom Tov or what have you.

So those are the three suggestions. Understand what is going on in the prayer as a whole. Number two, look for questions that send you searching for a deeper understanding of a particular prayer. And finally be patient

because you're not going to get the full *kavanah* except when you have time to do so and a larger congregation in which to do so. May your experience with *tefillah* continue to grow and to deepen, and may Hashem answer all your prayers.