

Tefillat Yitzchak תְּפִילַת יִצְחָק

A Commentary on the Jewish Prayers

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This introduction is based on some thoughts I wrote and distributed for the High Holidays of 5770. I am calling my series of teaching materials on prayer Tefillat Yitzchak תְּפִילַת יִצְחָק, “the prayer of Yitzchak” which is my own Hebrew name.

What is Jewish prayer?

It’s not one issue, but many. What could participating in a prayer service do for me? How can I find meaning in prayers written a long time ago, in a style and an idiom that is not familiar? Where can I find a meeting point between my **כַּוְּנָה** *Kavvanah*, the intentions I bring to the service, and the traditional service itself?

Over time I will add thoughts on particular prayers, but for the holidays I want to start out with some general ideas that I hope are helpful. I approach prayer and all of Judaism from a starting point of **מוֹסֵר** *Mussar*, the ethical dimension of Judaism. Prayer can and should be part of what we do to improve ourselves, to shape how we act in the world.

Here are four ways you can orient yourself to prayer generally. Warning: You might think that one angle contradicts another. I see it differently, as three perspectives or lenses on the same thing.

Words About God = Godly Words

Despite all the words in the **תּוֹרָה** *Torah* and the **סִידוּר** *Siddur* (prayerbook), we have no sure knowledge of God. That is what Jewish philosophers have said for centuries. Yet our study and our prayer are of course full of descriptions of God.

Harold Schulweis, a contemporary rabbi in California, teaches a different way of understanding all the descriptions and metaphors about God. He calls his approach “*predicate theology*”, because he argues that the most intelligible thing in a sentence like “God is merciful” is not the subject, but what comes at the end. When we associate an idea with God, we are saying: this is a Godly quality.

Each time we encounter a sentence in the prayers that characterizes God, Rabbi Schulweis instructs us to turn it around. “God heals the sick” becomes: *Healing the sick is Godly*. Thus, upholding those who fall is Godly. Being slow to anger is Godly. Liberating those who are oppressed is Godly. Protecting the Jewish people is Godly.

In this perspective, the prayer liturgy is not just *for* us, but *about* us. Praying is an ethical experience. The words point us toward the qualities of ourselves that are Godly, and the prayers urge us to use those qualities in our lives in the most powerful way possible.

Facing God

Think about the staging of the sanctuary. It is meant to be a place of majesty. We bow as though before royalty, and of course many of our prayers use the metaphor of God as a king.

It is good for us to bow our heads. Presenting ourselves before God is about humility. I am not the center of the universe. I do not hold all the wisdom that exists. Even collectively, we are not everything the world needs us to be, not yet at least.

טוֹב לְהוֹדוֹת לַה' *Tov l'hodot l'Adonai* -- It is good to acknowledge a power larger than the "I". Even if you are not sure if you "believe in God"; even as just a role-playing exercise. It can be a relief! It is good for us to have a time when we can surrender the burden of being *self-sufficient*, the burden of need to know the answer to every question or problem we face.

At particular moments when we bend and bow -- at the beginning and end of the עֲמִידָה *Amidah*, when the Torah emerges, during עֲלֵינוּ *Alaynu* -- imagine the burdens gathering on your forehead, and then dropping off as you bend. Or close your eyes, and take a moment to be humble, to seek guidance from somewhere else.

The Third Eye

In some ways, the community of prayer is artificial. We say the same words simultaneously, we sit in rows. We don't interact in the usual ways (not officially, at least).

But in other ways, the community of prayer is more real than any other community. We say important words in each other's presence. We remind ourselves of our deeper mission. We are aware around us of other people who are praying silently for their needs, who are thinking about תְּשׁוּבָה *Teshuvah*, personal change and the return to the truest self.

There is a mystical tradition in Judaism that we each have a "third eye", which sees everything as God would see. In particular, the third eye sees every other person as צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים *Tzelem Elohim*, the image of God. As the very best that each of us can be. When we are together as a prayer community, try to look at everyone with the third eye. And spend some time knowing that you are being seen by everyone else in the same way, with the third eye.

There is a special time in the morning, when the Torah circles the congregation once before it is read and once after. These are the only times when we do not face east toward Jerusalem, but

instead we turn to face the Torah as it makes its circuit. When you do this, you will see for a split second each member of the congregation in the same line of vision as the Torah, superimposed on each other. Pay attention to that -- to the image of each of us as an embodiment of wisdom and commitment, or as people newly renewed or taught by the Torah.

Repetition

The סידור *Siddur* (prayerbook) is long, but a lot of it is not complex. The same themes are pervasive and repeated. The perspectives I have suggested in the first three sections are available anytime. The prayer texts and the prayer experience are here as aids, tools, prompts.

The prayerbook is repetitive, but that can be liberating. We cannot possibly concentrate fully at every moment. But we don't need to, because the same words keep coming back. The opportunity to reflect, to look inward, to bow, to see others is here at any time and in every service. Whenever we are ready, we can find nearby what we need.