Prayer as Transformation
A Vision of Tefillah Education

■ by **James Jacobson-Maisels**

The most effective way for schools to teach and practice prayer, the author claims, is as a method of self-reflection and -transformation.

There is a problem with daily prayer in the Jewish world. Perhaps the central spiritual practice of the Jewish people is often experienced as a rushed obligation. This problem is reflected in our schools where prayer can often be meaningless and uninspiring for the students, even, or especially, after many years of practice.

This problem has been fed by insufficient and misguided prayer education. This is seen initially in its focus on skills and the siddur rather than on the transformative power of prayer itself as a spiritual practice. While skills and knowledge of the siddur are undoubtedly important and essential building blocks in developing a prayer life, they are not sufficient to make prayer meaningful and important to students and for them to create a continuing relationship to prayer throughout their lives. Anyone who wants to learn an instrument must learn and practice scales. But no one wants to play *only* scales their whole life. Scales are only the means to experience the beauty and wonder of music. True musical education allows the student not only to produce music but to appreciate and love it and to improvise and experiment with it. Our prayer education, however, often only teaches scales again and again, and then we wonder why our students check out.

Moreover, prayer is taught and led by teachers who themselves do not have a deep, conscious, meaningful and developed relationship with prayer. In any other subject we teach in our day schools, from math to Talmud, we expect the teachers to not only have expertise in their field, but also to have love and passion for their subject, a passion they will convey to their students. Yet we strangely have faculty teach and facilitate prayer in day schools whom have neither expertise nor passion for the subject. Effective and transformative prayer experiences and education can only happen when teachers themselves have expertise in and passion for their subject, when teachers are pray-ers, *mitpallelim*.

This approach to prayer education is then founded on two fundamental insights. First, we must teach prayer as a transformative and meaningful spiritual practice. Skills and the siddur have an important place in that educational vision, but only an instrumental one. Second, the teachers of prayer must themselves be *mitpallelim* who understand the practice and importance of prayer in their own lives and experience and so can convey that to their students. We believe in general that educators cannot affect truly meaningful change without working first on themselves and that this is acutely true in the case of prayer.

This approach to prayer education demands a different conception of and relationship to prayer. If prayer is a spiritual practice then we must be able to answer, as with any practice or discipline, what, why and how. What: what is the practice, what is its nature, what precisely is one doing when one prays? Why: what is the goal of the practice, why are we pursuing this practice, what do we hope to achieve? How: how should this practice be performed in order to achieve the goal, what techniques or approaches do we need to bring to bear on this practice?

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That prayer is a goal-oriented practice can be demonstrated by the core rabbinic texts concerning the nature of prayer and particularly the requirement of kavvanah (see sidebar). The goals of prayer, over the course of Jewish thought and practice, have been many including receiving that which one asks for, obeying the divine command, kabbalistic tikkun, communal solidarity, mystical union, self-analysis, comfort in the face of suffering and others.

Here, I would like to advocate for an educational approach that focuses on *a* particular goal, prayer as a technique to cultivate certain emotions, dispositions and ways of being in the world. While this is *one* goal of prayer it is *the* goal I advocate as primary for educational settings. I do so first because this is clearly a central goal in the very structure of prayer, as demonstrated by the Shema's call to ourselves to recognizes God's unity, and by the core rabbinic texts on prayer which denote prayer *avodah she-ba-lev*, the service of the heart. Second,

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 20]

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18]

it is *a* goal which is almost universally embraced in Jewish thought on prayer, alongside other important goals in different approaches.

Third, particularly in the context of education in community day schools but more generally in the modern world, it is theologically and metaphysically neutral. It does not require any particular theology or metaphysics, but only a willingness to try certain practices and see their effects. Fourth, it is a goal which is clearly and immediately relevant to every student and parent: becoming a more sensitive, moral, happier, healthier, better person. Finally, it helps us accomplish what should be one of the central goals of Jewish education: producing healthy, happy, emotionally intelligent, compassionate mentsches.

The focus on emotions and dispositions means that the goal is not certain states or experiences, but something much broader than that. We do not pray to attain a moment of ecstasy, but rather to become the best people we can be, to cultivate and live out qualities such as gratitude, love and humility in the world. In particular, I see prayer as cultivating the following constellations of dispositions (at least):

1. Openness / Vulnerability: the ability to feel all of what follows
2. Gratitude and Recognition of Blessings
3. Awe, Divine Presence, Wonder
4. Love, Compassion, Intimacy
5. Positive Desire, Yearning
6. Hope, Confidence, Optimism
7. Self-Worth, Divine-Nature/In the Image of God
8. Humility, Surrender, No-Self, No-Control
9. Self-Awareness, Honesty, Clarity, Concentration
10. Broken-Heartedness, Sorrow, Compassion
11. Redemption, Liberation, Freedom

Seeing prayer as a goal-oriented spiritual practice has profound implications for our educational approach. Having clear goals allows us to design effective curriculum which in turn creates more confident and empowered educators. It also allows for assessment and reflection and creates a mechanism for constructive criticism and change. These goals can now be articulated to students who quite naturally question the need and purpose of tefillah. When a student asks about the purpose of tefillah today and receives an answer about tradition, continuity or "this is what Jews do," I doubt the efficacy of such a response. When they are given an answer which explains how prayer can give them an appreciation for the beauty inherent in creation, an approach of gratitude to the world (which will improve their well-being and their relationship with themselves, their friends, families and teachers), or the self-love and confidence not to be nervous or uncomfortable in peer groups, the answer is much more direct and relevant to their lives.

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The tradition is replete with techniques for the practice of prayer, including imagining oneself before the Divine Presence, mindfulness meditation, mantra practice, eye gestures, hand gestures, trembling, weeping and groaning, among others.

The first step in this approach is to create educators who are *mitpallelim*, to train educators themselves to have a conscious, deep and transformative prayer practice. We need to introduce educators to approaches to prayer and prayer techniques which cultivate the many dispositions listed above. They must have the means to teach in a way that combines text and reflection with concrete practices and techniques.

Such practices and techniques exist throughout the tradition and can be adopted from earlier teachings as well as innovated by contemporary practitioners. Prayer as practice must first be grounded in the very structure and requirements of classic rabbinic prayer. Bowing, whispering in the Amidah, saying prayer in an emotionally evocative way (as *tahanunim*, rather than reading from a letter), or simply asking God for things (*bakashot*) are all concrete and detailed techniques and must be understood and practiced as such. Yet when performed habitually they lose their power as practices of cultivation. To be effective they must be performed and approached with understanding, awareness and intention.

Moreover, the tradition is replete with other recommended techniques such as using music to evoke the power of particular blessings in the Amidah (Sefer Chasidim), imagining oneself before the Divine Presence (Sanhedrin 22a, Elijah de Vidas), mindfulness meditation (Piaseczner Rebbe), mantra practice (Besht), eye gestures (Yevamot 105b), hand gestures (Shabbat 10a), trembling (Shulhan Arukh), requests as the cultivation of humility and dependence (Bahya ibn Pakuda), personalizing each blessing (Yerushalmi Brakhot 4:4), weeping and groaning (Devarim Rabba, Va-etchanan, 2:1) among others. In addition, by developing a deep understanding of the nature of prayer and its various components, such as the performative nature of language in prayer, or the body's knowledge and communication in prayer, practitioners can innovate their own techniques to enhance their prayer practice.

The practice of prayer must be at the center and taught to educators by teach-

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 31]

Prayer in Dialogue with Tanakh

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27]

posed to treat others. If line 2 was about pondering the mission of one's life, then line 3 is about an ethical charge as the animation of one's life.

The fundamental theme of any blessing is often found in its final words, following the formula "Blessed are You, God." Here, those words are simply: "Shield of Abraham." In what way is God a shield for Abraham? The expression is found only in Genesis 15.

After those things, the word of the Lord came to Avram in a vision, saying, "Don't fear, Avram, ***I am a shield for you****. Your reward will be very great. But Avram said, "O Lord, God, what can you give me, seeing that I shall die childless and the one in charge of my household is Damesek Eliezer!" Avram said, "Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir." The word of the Lord came to him saying, "That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir. … Then [the Lord] said to [Avram], "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur Casdim to assign this land to you as a possession." And he said, "O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?"* (Genesis 15:1–8).

The foundation of the relationship between God and Abraham is based on two promises: Abraham will have many offspring, and he will inherit the land of Canaan. When God encountered Abraham for the first time in Genesis 12, these promises were made outright. But here in Genesis 15, Abraham is afraid that God will not make good on these promises. Abraham questions God: where is my child? God does not become angry, but simply reiterates the promise that children are on the way. But when God renews the promise of the land, Abraham does not fundamentally believe. He asks: Lord, God, how will I know? This verse is viewed in early Jewish tradition as the classic expression of doubt in the mouth of Abraham (see Nedarim 32a).

We often think of Abraham as, in Kierkegaard's phrase, the "Knight of Faith," the one who was willing to sacrifice his beloved son on the altar to fulfill God's word. However, the conclusion of this blessing reflects a very different Abraham—the one who is plagued with doubts. In many ways this is the crux of the blessing that is the foundation of the Amidah. Read with the biblical intertext, the prayer can be saying: don't worry about your doubts. Even Abraham was filled with doubt, and he had a direct relationship with God. The project of prayer, this blessing could say, is that of holding your doubt and grappling with it, but not letting that be a reason to drop out of relationship with God.

Whether or not these particular interpretations speak to you, the larger point is that an intertextual interpretive approach to prayer yields a tremendous amount of nuance to an enterprise that, on the surface, may feel like a piling-on of praise after praise for God. The experience of prayer is greatly enhanced if the siddur is treated like so many other texts in Jewish heritage, as a starting point for interpretation rather than a surface statement of dogma. Seen as a book of poetry, with myriad allusions waiting to be unlocked, the siddur can become a thrilling text for students to study and develop their own interpretive understandings. ■

Prayer as Transformation

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20]

ers who themselves have a developed and systematic understanding of prayer as a spiritual practice which includes both the techniques necessary to achieve the dispositional goals of prayer and the methods to work with obstacles and difficulties as they arise.

Doing so means understanding prayer as a holistic practice which both includes and goes far beyond the saying of certain words in the siddur, involving also the body, sound, imagination, other uses of language and various states of mind and consciousness. Educators need to be systematically trained in these practices so that they can take on an educational role more akin to a music teacher, sports coach, art teacher, dance instructor and counselor than a teacher in a traditional text-based learning environment. Our teachers today, including the clergy amongst them, are almost entirely untrained in this area—a shocking indictment of our education of Jewish professionals.

After having developed their own personal relationship with prayer in the context of a broader systematic understanding of prayer, educators can then learn how to bring a meaningful relationship to prayer to their students. Transforming the prayer lives of their students will be based on this understanding of prayer as a spiritual practice and the concrete approaches and practices they have learned. Through introducing both this understanding of prayer and its concrete practice to their students, grounded in their own direct experience and insight, students will be enabled to develop their own dispositions and will experience the life-enriching effects of the practice. There is much more to say about how to do that in particular, which would include an in-depth investigation of the components of prayer, a profound exploration of the concrete practices to be taught, and the application of these understandings and practices to specific educational settings, but the key first step is providing the insight, understanding and experience to the teachers themselves, without which they cannot be effective educators and truly convey the importance and power of prayer. ■