

Sparks

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To Pray the Jewish Way

At first glance prayer seems to be about whining and begging G-d, "Please heal this person ... please bring me my soul-mate ... please help my business, etc." One could mistakenly think that G-d is holding out on us and gets pleasure watching us grovel.

When we are faced with some very serious problems, it is customary to ask others to join together in our prayers. What is that all about? It seems as if we hope to move G-d through force: "G-d, if you don't respond to my prayers, then I will recruit through the e-mail thousands of others to pray."

Do we think these strategies really work? What are we actually doing here? If G-d is all knowing then why am I telling Him my problems? He already knows them. If G-d is good then why am I asking for Him to change my situation? Obviously whatever happens to me is for my best and I should just trust G-d.

To appreciate what we are actually doing when we pray, we have to examine what prayer really means. First, we have to understand that in Judaism we do not pray. Prayer is an English word. What Jews do is *l'hispallel*.

L'hispallel is a unique experience, but as with most Jewish things today, this holy word has been changed into an English word with a western connotation. The word "prayer" actually comes from the Latin word meaning "to beg" — exactly what most people feel prayer is. They imagine a big king in the sky who is getting a big ego boost from watching his subjects beg. This is a terrible image of our selves and of G-d.

L'hispallel has nothing to do with begging G-d to change His mind. *L'hitpallel* is a reflexive verb and it means to do something to your self, not to G-d. When you are praying, your question should not be, "Is G-d listening to my prayers?" For sure he is. What you should really ask yourself is, "Am I listening to my prayers? Does what I say impact me? Have I changed?"

If you are under the impression that praying is communicating to G-d information that He does not already know, then the whole prayer experience becomes ridiculous. G-d knows that your business is falling apart. G-d knows that you desperately want your soul-mate. G-d knows exactly what is going on in your life. *L'hispallel* is not about G-d hearing your prayer. It is about you hearing your prayers. You need to say these things to G-d not because He need to hear them but because you need to hear yourself saying them to G-d.

L'hispallel means to do something to your self. Exactly what you are doing is *palleling* yourself. And what exactly is that? We see the word *palel* in the story of Jacob and Joseph. When Joseph learns that his father Jacob is nearing his death, he goes to his father for a blessing for his two children. Jacob says, "I never *palel-ti* that I would ever see your face again, and G-d has granted me to even see the face of your children." What do you think the term means here? I never hoped...? I never imagined...? I never dreamed...? I never anticipated?

The great 11th century Torah commentator Rashi explains the verse to mean, "I never would have filled my heart to think the thought that I would ever see your face again." Therefore, when we *l'hispallel*, we are actively, intentionally trying to fill our hearts, to think the thoughts, to dream the dreams of what it is that we want to see and do in this world and then change ourselves in order to make these things happen. It is not G-d whom we are trying to change. It is ourselves and our relationship to G-d we are trying to change through prayer. If we change ourselves, we change our whole situation.

Please do not misunderstand this important principle. *L'hispallel* does not mean to meditate and talk to yourself as if you could ever make things happen for your self without G-d. Of course, G-d listens to our prayers and answers but we are not trying to change G-d's mind we are trying to change ourselves.

If you pray in order to change G-d's mind, then, please for G-d's sake, don't pray. We don't want to change G-d's mind. And thank G-d we can't change G-d's mind because G-d has made up His mind long time ago. G-d only and always loves us and seeks to give us the greatest good. As Psalmist praised, "His compassion (unconditional love) is upon all His creatures."

Of course, G-d hears our prayers and answers but He is waiting for *us* to hear our prayers and mean them. Prayer is not passive, it is proactive. Through prayer we must inspire ourselves to take action and make changes within ourselves, our community and the world. When we change ourselves for the good we let G-d's never-changing love for us and His abundant blessings become manifest in our lives. The more we praise G-d and acknowledge that He is the source of all blessings and truly want those blessings in our lives the more G-d's blessings flow into our lives.

Prayer is not about changing G-d's mind. G-d's mind is steadfast. He only and always loves us and wants to shower us with His blessings. Prayer is about changing our selves. Prayer is about attuning our will to G-d's will and making our selves receptive to receive His loving presence and blessings into our lives. G-d is waiting to hear from us and invite Him into our lives.

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