

How To Develop A Meaningful Prayer Life, Part Two

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By Rabbi Stuart Gershon
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Abstract: We bring our ancient prayerbook alive when we infuse it with 21st century interpretations. We make old prayers come alive by attaching to them our own personal meaning and emotional feeling. As every Jewish generation has done before us, now the challenge and the thrill is ours to make the old prayers our own, to pour into those old bottles new wine.

The theme of my teaching tonight is how to develop a meaningful prayer life, part two.

In Part One, we explored a new way of thinking about prayer: namely, that the primary purpose of prayer is not only about changing God and connecting with God, but equally about changing us and connecting with our inner selves. For prayer is one of the ways we grow into more loving and compassionate and calm human beings.

We also talked about not limiting the definition of prayer just to praising God or asking God for forgiveness or material things, but to be more expansive to include introspection, contemplation of our most highly-held values, and an inner summons to action. This too is prayer.

Finally, I tried to make the case that a prayer life is one of the ways we contribute to the development of human evolution. A prayer life helps humanity to close the gap between our high-level technological capacities to blow up the world and our far lesser capacities to control the aggressive, angry, hateful, and reactive tendencies of our reptilian brains. A prayer life is of consequence for the future of the world.

Tonight, I want to explore one of the most frequently mentioned barriers to a prayer life namely, objections to the traditional words of the prayers themselves. For example, some of us are bothered by the prayerbook's assumption that God is a "he," a male. Others of us object to the prayerbook's portrayal of God as a person, rather than as nature or an impersonal cosmic force or energy. To sum it up, as one person once said to me, "The words of the prayers often say the opposite of what I would want to say."

How do we overcome this barrier to prayer? We overcome it by making the prayers our own. We transcend it by doing what previous Jewish generations have done for centuries. Either we write new prayers or we infuse the old words with new meanings. We put new wine into old bottles.

Probably the most famous Jewish prayer is the Shema. How many of us know what it says? Even more significantly, how many of us know what it means? Let's take a look at the words: *shema yisrael adonai eloheinu adonai echad*. *Shema* is in the imperative form. It means: listen up, pay attention.

Who should listen? The people of Israel. What should they hear? That the God who goes by the name of adonai is our God, and that God is one. Note that the Shema is technically not a prayer. It is not asking for anything. It is a declaration. A proclamation that God is one.

What does it mean that God is one? For the biblical Jew, God's oneness means that there is only one God. For the rabbinic Jew, God's oneness means God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. For the medieval Jew, God's oneness means that God is utterly unique and incomparable, ultimately unknowable to the human mind. For the mystical and chassidic Jew, God's oneness means that God is all there is. God is the universe and the universe is God.

Every Jewish generation has added a new meaning to the old words. Every Jewish generation has interpreted the Shema differently. What can God's oneness mean to us, Jews of the 21st century? What can these words mean to you?

I'd like to ask you now to please turn to your neighbor and discuss this for one minute.

What are some of our 21st century interpretations of God is one? God is everywhere; we are all God's children; we have a human responsibility to bring all humanity together as one; God is the higher truth beyond all the dualities in the world; God is the force that causes the universe and us to evolve; God wants us to listen, to pay attention to what is going on around us.

Now what can we learn from this exercise? There is a big difference between what the words say and what they can mean. The words say only one thing, but they can mean many different things.

From now on, whenever you stand to recite the Shema, the experience of it will never be what it was for you before. It will be much better! For now you know what the Shema means to you, you understand what truth it holds for you. Now you know why you want to rise to proclaim it.

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