

Jewish Prayer: The Adult View by Lisa Aiken

As a child you probably received a sweater or some article of clothing you liked a lot. However, to your dismay, within a year you outgrew it. There was no alternative other than to replace that sweater with a new, larger one..

Our first prayers and notions about God were learned when we were still children. But, unlike our old sweaters, how many of us have thrown out our childish notions of God and prayer and replaced them with more mature ideas?

For example, imagine that you are a three-year-old child, and you want a piece of cake. Your considerations as a three-year-old are "I want cake. I'm entitled to it, and I must have it!" From the viewpoint of a young child, the major function of parents is to gratify the child's wishes. When they don't, the child feels angry and deprived.

Now imagine yourself in the place of the parent. You happen to know that if the child were to eat the cake, he would get sick or lose his appetite for nutritious food for the rest of the day. From the parent's perspective, how would you feel declining the child's request? How great is the difference between the child's feeling and that of the parent!

One of the fundamental differences between how children and adults view the world is that children filter the world primarily through their emotions, whereas adults can rely more on their intellect to make sense of their experiences. Our emotional view of God is often that of the child who wants.

We often feel angry at God for hurting, frustrating, or ignoring us. We have to realize that these feelings are reactions to our perception of God, not to the reality of how God acts toward us. We can never get total knowledge of God's motivations. Therefore, when we react to God's denying us what we want, we must rely, at least in part, on our

intellectual understanding of His behavior, and also in part on trust in Him.

Adam and Eve: The First Prayers

God created us with the need to pray so we would have a vehicle through which we could forge an ongoing relationship with Him. We see this from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Bible tells how the serpent enticed Eve to eat of the prohibited fruit of the tree of knowledge. She then gave Adam the forbidden fruit to eat. God responded by punishing Adam, Eve, and the serpent. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, and Adam had to work the soil. The serpent was cursed by having to eat the dust of the earth.

But what kind of curse was that? Dust is everywhere: no matter where the serpent might find himself, he would always have plenty of food!

The curse was that the serpent was now self-sufficient. One who is self-sufficient will never approach his Creator to ask for necessities.. In other words, God was so disgusted with the serpent He wanted as little as possible to do with him. In contrast, God desired humans to always turn to Him to ask for what they need.

Self-Improvement through Prayer

Prayer is not only a request for physical and material needs, but also a vehicle to transform ourselves into more developed persons. When we lack something, we should do some heavy thinking. What is it that we're missing? Do we really need and want it? If we get what we desire, will we use the gift in a way that God intended: to elevate us spiritually? Without this process, we might simply use our blessings to satisfy our physical or material desires.

Additionally, prayer allows us to forge a relationship with God and make Him a reality in our lives rather than an abstract concept.

These are the benefits that the serpent, as well people who see themselves as self-sufficient, will miss out on since they will not feel compelled to connect with God.

The Need to Verbalize Prayer

One of the tenets of Jewish prayer is that it is not enough simply to "think" a prayer, or to have a certain feeling in one's heart toward God. Jewish prayer requires people to actually say the words. Why? Why can't we just feel something in our hearts and communicate it to God by thinking?

One of the greatest challenges of any relationship is in communicating effectively. Many married couples love each other but cannot communicate that love. Love and communication are not synonymous. If a husband can't express his love to his wife, or vice versa, the love may ultimately erode and eventually be replaced by aloofness or even resentment.

In the same vein, it's not enough to worship God in our hearts. We must also communicate our thoughts and feelings verbally, or they cannot enable us to deepen our relationship with God. When we say what we feel, God becomes more of a reality for us, and we show a deeper level of sincerity about the relationship. No normal person speaks out loud unless someone is listening.

Our verbalization concretizes for us that God really hears what we say. In addition, once we verbalize our feelings, they attain a reality that is much stronger for us than had we not committed these feelings to words.

God Meets You Halfway

As much as we yearn to reach a God who at times seems inaccessible, God yearns, as it were, to respond to our strivings. Were our entire task in prayer to try to engage our hearts to talk to God, we might not succeed. However, the process of prayer is not a one-way street. Once we start talking to God, we demonstrate that we are trying to access Him. Quickly God responds by allowing us to feel His nearness and His reality. The more we allow ourselves to let go of our privacy and share our innermost selves with God, the more we overcome the distance we feel between ourselves and Him.