



# 12

## Cultivating a Personal Prayer Voice

We need to illuminate for people that prayer is not only communal. We've sold them a line that you can't be a Jew by yourself, but, of course, that's ridiculous. In fact, if you can't be a Jew by yourself, then you can't build Jewish community. So, teaching people to wander off alone and to sit in silence, teaching them to daven by themselves, that's a gift. Because that will revitalize the praying they will do in community, too.

RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON

I get there's a dialectic between tradition and what works, but if I have to choose, I'd rather have people who are open to God in whatever way. And if it doesn't end up being in Jewish language, I'll feel saddened, but I'll also feel really excited that people are connecting with God. That's the challenge. I'd sacrifice the Hebrew content for God content; ideally I'd have them both.

RABBI DAVID INGBER



Finding my personal prayer voice was extraordinarily difficult and incredibly easy.

It was so difficult that I was well past ordination, into my forties, before I could say, "Please, God, may it be that ..." The block was entirely mental.

Personal prayer is difficult because the public model of such prayer seems to make a mockery of it. How many times have we heard an arrogant, self-righteous televangelist speak as if God was in his pocket?

American Jews are so turned off by what looks to them like the excesses of Christian fundamentalism and the politics of much of Christian fundamentalism that this kind of overtly spiritual God-talk makes them very nervous. And rightly so.

RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON

Personal, spontaneous prayer was just not an option for me. Never mind the theological issues. My self-image as an educated, intelligent citizen of Western civilization made personal prayer distasteful.

But my internal resistance was like the Berlin Wall. It was rock solid for decades; once it began to crumble, it came down fast. The last brick fell at a Buddhist meditation retreat, where we engaged in the blessings practice presented later in this book (practice 7). Never had I connected words so strongly to my heart's desires. This was due partly to the wisdom of praying in this fashion. But another factor was also at play.

I spent hour after hour observing myself, examining thoughts and emotions. I watched my personality, and even my subconscious, interact with the world in great detail. It was a practice of cutting through delusions about who I am and what makes me tick.

The result was stunning. Like never before, I knew what I needed, really needed, deep down, where the neuroses and bedrock fears were shaping me. I prayed and prayed. Looking back, I think I know why. And that leads me to a theory of prayer that works, at least, for me.



When you know what you really need, truly and honestly, prayer comes easily, because it is the right prayer. The method is simple. Take some time to discover what you really need and what you really feel. Then put it into words (or movement or music or mental images), address it to God and let it go.

The word *discover* above is not accidental. We have myriad defense mechanisms to get us through the day, and they serve to cover up our deepest needs, lest we cease to function. The listening and mindfulness techniques covered in chapter 7 are important. As the old adage says: a wise person listens before she speaks.

Here is wisdom from our teachers on cultivating your personal prayer voice.

### **Starting to Pray**

I learned to pray from M. Scott Beck, who wrote *The Road Less Travelled*. I had invited him to the 92nd Street Y when I was working there. I was to interview him on stage and we were waiting together. We got the five-minute warning, combed our hair, straightened our ties, and he turned and said to me, "Rabbi, bless us." The only thing that came to mind was *hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz* [the blessing over bread]. He was saying rabbi, pray, pray for us at this moment. Forget the script, what are your *kishkas* [guts] saying? What is your soul saying at this moment? And it absolutely transformed my prayer life. I started to pray spontaneous prayer. Now, I do it all the time.

RABBI LAVEY YITZCHAK DERBY

A woman came to me, she was having surgery, and she realized that what she really needed was to pray about it. She's an Orthodox woman who knows how to pray, but she felt she needed to say something particular about her situation. We sat down and I asked her what she needed to say. And this most beautiful, personal prayer came from the very same woman who felt she didn't have the words.

RABBI NAOMI LEVY



### Start with *Hitbodedut*

A place to begin that is challenging but really works for some people is a *hitbodedut* practice [see practice 12], where we speak freely to God without stopping. It's very important to know that even Rabbi Nachman [the Hasidic rabbi and originator of this exercise] didn't always know what to say and he had a way of handling that. He would repeat *Ribono shel olam* [Sovereign of the universe] over and over until something new came up. You can just keep saying or writing, "I don't know what to say, I don't know what to say," until more comes. It's a way of bypassing the resistance.

DR. LINDA THAL

### At the Western Wall

I thought I knew something about prayer, but I found out otherwise. I was at the Kotel [Western Wall], saying *tehillim* [psalms], and thinking that I was really praying. Then I saw a blind man being led down to the Kotel. He ran his fingers over the stones, feeling thousands of years of history. Then he kissed the Wall, and began talking to God. He spoke very rapidly, and I could not understand everything he said. Abruptly he stopped, paused momentarily, then said, "Oh, I told you about that yesterday," and resumed his communication. I realized that he was really communicating with God, and knew that He listened. I resumed saying *tehillim*, but with a much different *kavvanah*.

RABBI ABRAHAM TWERSKI, MD

### Your Prayer

Prayer is not always ancient,  
Most prayer hasn't even been written yet,  
Your prayer hasn't been written yet....

RABBI ZOË KLEIN

