

HOW TO PRAY

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Rebbe Nachman teaches: A person should put all his energy into his prayers. This is the deeper meaning of, 'For Your sake are we killed all the day' (Psalms 44:23). By exerting oneself in one's prayers, it is as if one is sanctifying God's Name (*Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom* #12). Similarly, a person should try to concentrate fully when praying. As long as the person praying is aware of another person in his presence, his *kavanah* is not complete. A person should attain a level in prayer where there is only God and himself (*Likutey Moharan* II, 103).

Reb Naftali prayed this way. Once, the Rebbe related: In the Upper Worlds someone was praying very intensely. I uncovered his face and saw it was my Naftali (*Aveneha Barzel* p. 75). As part of the Points Decrees, which began in 1827, the Russian government instituted a compulsory draft, conscripting Jewish children into the Czar's army for as long as twenty-five years. It was quite common for press gangs to enter Jewish homes in search of new conscripts. Even those with deferments were not spared. Corrupt soldiers would ask to be shown the child's identity papers together with the draft deferment and then, after callously destroying the documents, spirit the child away. Once, while such a search was being conducted in Uman, a family whose son did have the necessary documents came running into Reb Naftali's house. Even though Reb Naftali was praying Minchah (the Afternoon Service) at the time, they purposely made a great deal of commotion so as to attract a large crowd. Only then, in the presence of these many witnesses, did they produce their son's papers. Later, when Reb Naftali finished praying, the family members approached him to ask forgiveness for having disturbed his prayers. Surprised by their request, Reb Naftali insisted that he hadn't heard anything at all (*Aveneha Barzel* p. 75).

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Perhaps the most difficult thing to attain in prayer is concentration. The story is told of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev who went to a person in his synagogue one day, right after the prayers, and gave him a very warm *sholom aleichem!* Startled, the man said, "But I've been here the whole time." Rabbi Levi Yitzchak answered, "But during the prayers your mind wandered to Warsaw where you were thinking of your business. Now that your prayers are finished, you have returned here to Berditchev!"

Rebbe Nachman placed great emphasis on concentrating on each

and every word, each and every letter. He knew the difficulty involved in this and therefore gave us numerous suggestions on how we can at least attempt to pray with *kavanah*. These are offered in the next few paragraphs.

A person should pray with all his might and strength. If a person were just to concentrate on his prayers the words themselves would give him the energy to pray with all his might (*Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #66*).

Furthermore, Rebbe Nachman teaches: Never let shame stop you from praying (*Likutey Moharan I, 30:end*). One should not think that he is not fit to pray, if he has erred or sinned. One should make every effort to strengthen himself during the prayers.

The essence of prayer entails direct, simple understanding of the words (*Likutey Moharan II, 120*). The Rebbe was deathly ill on the final Rosh Hashanah eve of his life (5571/1810). He asked his little grandson, Yisrael, to pray for him. "God! God!" Yisrael called out, "let my grandfather be well!" The people nearby started smiling. The Rebbe said, "This is how to pray. Simply! What other way is there?" (*Tzaddik #439*).

Knowing what you are saying certainly makes the task easier. Rebbe Nachman emphasized *hitbodedut* (secluded prayer) because then you speak to God in your native tongue. It could be this way with our daily prayers, too. Our Sages taught that prayer can be recited in the language one understands (*Orach Chaim 101:4*). Nevertheless, *Lashon Kodesh* (the Holy Tongue) is all encompassing and there are many advantages to praying in the original Hebrew. It therefore seems most advisable to have a Hebrew/English siddur (prayer book) so that, wherever you don't fully understand the original, you can look at the translation and appreciate the meaning of what you are saying.

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On the return voyage from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the

ship on which Rebbe Nachman was travelling sprung a leak. Everybody rushed to drain the water from the ship. The Rebbe, who was physically very weak, could not participate in the very strenuous labor. So as not to discourage the others, he made his face red, as if here were exerting himself. Later, when discussing prayer with his followers, the Rebbe said: "You are like I was on the ship. You only pretend to be exerting yourselves in prayer" (*Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom* #121). It takes effort, lots of effort, to pray properly, but Rebbe Nachman teaches that it can be done. Just be careful. Don't fool yourself into thinking that with external motions alone you are praying properly.



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We should try to fully concentrate on the words we are saying. It would be wonderful if we could move ourselves to cry and shed tears while praying. "But," Rebbe Nachman taught, "that too is a foreign thought, i.e. to think about crying while praying." If you feel aroused, fine and good. However, the main thing is to concentrate on the words you are saying (*Likutey Moharan* II, 95).

Foreign, distracting thoughts during prayer are like facing

the enemy in battle. Like a good soldier, one must get on with the task at hand. Though a person may not be successful in praying the entire prayer with full concentration he will at least be “wounding” and “maiming” the opposition – the foreign thoughts. Eventually, if he maintains his determination, he will win the battle (*Likutey Moharan* II, 122).

Don't be totally insistent that your prayers be answered. Pray, and pray hard, but don't absolutely insist that God do as you demand. Let your prayers be supplications, entreaties. Otherwise (God will give into your demand, but) it is like stealing from Above (*Likutey Moharan* I, 195).

Once, when Reb Noson was in Uman, he saw a certain Reb Moshe praying very fervently. Some time afterward, Reb Noson returned to Uman and saw that Reb Moshe was no longer praying with the same intensity and effort. Reb Noson said to him, “Reb Moshe, you've weakened. You're not praying the way you used to. Take my advice and start again. Look at me. My beard is already white, yet I still have intentions of becoming a good Jew!” (*Aveneha Barzel* p. 63). We all go through hot and cold periods. The main thing is not to give up.

(Taken from the book [Crossing the Narrow Bridge: A Practical Guide to Rebbe Nachman's Teachings](#) – prayer)