

Teaching Prayer to the Adults that Our Children will Become  
Joseph G. Rosenstein (2005)

Talking about prayer is always difficult because if we take prayer seriously then among the topics that should be discussed are God and God's relationship to us, individually and collectively. And those are not easy issues.

Talking about prayer with children is even more difficult because the discussion has to be age-appropriate, but at the same time has to serve as groundwork for more mature understandings when the children grow older.

Unfortunately, when many of our children become ready for a more mature view of God, Jewish educators are no longer present in their lives, and so cannot help them develop that more mature understanding. So the challenge to Jewish educators is to find ways of teaching to the adult that the child will become, even while we teach to the child at his or her level.

That means that we may need somehow to raise and respond to their questions years before they are ready to ask them, to raise and respond to the questions that the child will ask about God when he or she becomes a young adult. They may well ask, years after they finish Hebrew school, "Does God respond to my prayers?" or "Where was God during the Holocaust?" Who will be there at that time to help them find an answer to such questions? Or will they simply decide to stop coming to services because in their hearts they have decided that, if God didn't listen to the prayers of millions of our people, then God is certainly not going to respond to their prayers.

How many youngsters sitting in your synagogue every Shabbat, or in your school several times a week, will eventually walk away from Judaism because they never had the opportunity or the permission to voice aloud the questions that are in their hearts? Thus, not only do we have to raise these questions, we have to validate them – that is, we somehow have to convey a message (to the young adult that is not yet in front of us) that asking such questions is acceptable, that wrestling with these problems, and with God, is well within the tradition. At the same time, however, we have good reasons not to stimulate such questions prematurely, not to create doubts before children have the capacity to deal with such doubts. This is a formidable challenge.

For many years, I have taught courses on Jewish prayer to adults and generally begin by asking participants to describe the obstacles they experience to meaningful prayer. In this article, I will briefly describe the three major categories of obstacles that they describe, and the implication of these obstacles for teachers of children who will become adults. A more extended description of the obstacles and how they are addressed in Siddur Eit Ratzon, a siddur I recently published, can be found at the siddur website [www.newsiddur.org](http://www.newsiddur.org). Siddur Eit Ratzon is a traditional prayerbook for those who are seeking meaning and spirituality. Its four-column format includes the traditional Hebrew text and a complete transliteration, as well as new translations and commentaries. It focuses on the spiritual journey of the morning prayers and includes kavvanot and meditations that assist the traveler. Among the information available at the website that may be particularly useful to Jewish educators is the first unit of a Study Guide, entitled "An Overview of the Shabbat Morning Service."

One category of responses by adults to the question, "What obstacles to prayer do you experience?" is that there are troubling philosophical and theological assumptions in the Siddur. For many people prayer is difficult because it seems to them that acceptance of these assumptions is a prerequisite to prayer. Among the assumptions that some find problematic are that the dead will be resurrected, that Israel is the chosen people, that we are better than other nations, that God responds to prayer, and that God punishes transgressors and rewards the

righteous. These obstacles are addressed in Siddur Eit Ratzon by offering options at many points in the service and briefly discussing on that page why these options are there. It recognizes that many people in a prayer service may question some of the assumptions in the traditional text, and gives them permission to substitute different words whose assertions are closer to their own beliefs. It tells them that they are allowed to daven even if they reject some or even all of what some say are the fundamental beliefs of Judaism. It tells them that they don't have to leave their intellect and intuition at the door when they enter the davening space.

This brings us back to the challenge discussed earlier of making youngsters aware that not all Jews have the same beliefs without generating doubts prematurely. One way of doing this is to use materials and prayerbooks in which options are presented and explained. That allows the educator to stress that there are options at many points in the service because, for a variety of reasons, different Jews say the prayers using different words; this can be done without actually initiating discussions of all the options and their rationales until children are ready for such discussions.

Before continuing with the discussion of obstacles to prayer, let us focus for a moment on two of the problematic assumptions mentioned above, that God punishes transgressors and that God responds to prayer. Unlike the other theological assumptions mentioned above, the children's own experience will provide "refutation" of these assumptions. That is, the first time the child consciously does something wrong and isn't punished for it, he or she may come to believe that the notion that God punishes transgressors is a myth. Similarly, the first time the child makes a request to God and gets no response, he or she may come to believe that God is not listening to prayer. We have to be careful not to convey to children that lightning will strike them if they misbehave, or that God operates a cosmic candy machine that provides favors in return for heartfelt prayers. At the same time, we have to teach them the value of petitionary prayer, if by that we mean talking to God about what's in our heart and asking for God's help to tune in to the blessings that God provides each day to all of creation.

A second category of obstacles to prayer has to do with the language of the prayerbook. People complain that the language is boring and repetitive, that most prayers seem to focus on praising God, that the translations are expressed in language to which they cannot relate, and that, ultimately, even though they may not express it in these terms, the prayers increase the separation between themselves and God.

This situation is similar to the one discussed earlier. If we teach our youngsters only what they need to know about prayer as children, then how will they learn what they need to know about prayer as adults? If they see prayer as rote repetition when they are children, they will likely continue to see prayer as rote repetition when they are adults. For some, this will be sufficient; that is, they will view prayer as an obligation and will continue to pray, whether or not they have a meaningful experience while praying. For others, for many others, this will not be sufficient, and they will abandon prayer as meaningless. I dare say that if you surveyed adults who had a Jewish education and asked them what constitutes Jewish prayer, a substantial percentage will say that prayer consists of reciting certain paragraphs, and this response will be prevalent across the spectrum of observance and belief. For those who are looking for meaning in prayer, for those who want prayer to be a conversation with God, their many years of rote prayer may serve only as an obstacle.

In translating the prayers, I started with two assumptions, that the prayers were written as reports of their authors' intense spiritual experiences and insights and that my task in part was to try and recapture these "Wow!" experiences. My conviction is that, to a large extent, the obstacles due to the language of the prayerbook are not a consequence of the prayers themselves, but of the ways they have been translated. The authors of the prayers and psalms

were not trying to bore us, but were trying to transmit their insights to us. I tried to write a translation that was readable, meaningful, and interesting. It focuses on capturing the meaning and spiritual excitement of the Hebrew text and the insights of their authors, using the words of the prayers whenever possible and diverging from their literal meaning whenever necessary. If, as the sages say, the Torah was written in language that will facilitate human understanding, shouldn't the same opportunity be accorded the Siddur.

Another important feature of the translation in Siddur Eit Ratzon is that it consistently refers to God in the second person, even when the Hebrew text is in the third person. (The Hebrew text often switches back and forth, seamlessly, between these two.) This has two very important consequences: it reduces the separation between us and God, and it eliminates the use of masculine language in referring to God. With respect to the first, although in the past people may have needed to imagine God as grand and distant, today it seems that people need to be able to find ways to establish a personal connection with God, however God and that connection are understood; austere language sprinkled with Thees and Thous no longer seems to work well.

With respect to the second consequence of referring to God in the second person, many girls and boys, when they become women and men, will question why Judaism speaks of God exclusively in masculine terms. This issue becomes so important for many people that it distracts them completely from prayer. Reference to the idiosyncrasies of Hebrew grammar may satisfy them intellectually, but it will not ease the emotional difficulty of praying to a God who the tradition continuously identifies as male. We should use translations with our children that refer to God in gender-neutral ways; we are not expected by the tradition to believe that God really is male, and so there is no reason for us to use language with our children that will become an obstacle to prayer when they become adults.

A third category of obstacles to prayer is that people feel lost when they are in a service. For many this is because they are unable to read or understand the Hebrew, but for many others, those with a stronger Jewish background, it is because of a lack of understanding of the structure and flow of the prayer service. In Siddur Eit Ratzon, the transliteration and translation facilitate reading and understanding the Hebrew, but there are also guidelines in the commentary column that provide both an overview of the service, and information about where the service is now. While we need to focus on teaching children the details of the prayer service, we also need to step back and enable them to understand the service as a whole and the spiritual journey that it describes.

The keva is important, but so is the kavanah. Keva refers to the need for prayer to be regular, to have a fixed time and fixed words; from the keva perspective, prayer is a practice that we need to engage in on a daily basis. Kavanah refers to the need for prayers to be full of meaning, purpose, and concentration; from the kavvanah perspective, prayer is a practice that has to be different every time we do it. Our recurring problem is how to make prayer routine but not routinized, how to take keva and make kavanah out of it.

Borrowing from another domain of education in which I work, mathematics education, one consequence of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation's emphasis on accountability is that more effort in K-12 math instruction is going into ensuring that children pass state mathematics assessments. Often the instruction in the assessed skills is at the expense of understanding; there are short-term gains, that is, more children may pass the tests, but there may be long-term losses, in that children won't develop the understandings that they will need in the future. We must ask ourselves to what extent do we do the same in preparing children for bar- and bat-mitzvah.

The keva is important, but so is the kavanah. We need to show our children how to reposition themselves so that they can leave everyday space and move into holy prayer-space. We need to show them how to turn from a place of darkness into a place of light, where God's presence is evident. We need to convey to them that belief in God, however understood, can make a difference in their lives. Perhaps spending more time on meditative prayer, perhaps more practice with slow davening would be beneficial.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts bring us closer to You, so that You can be a source of strength and hope for us all.

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