# The Value of an Explanatory Prayer Service

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This past Shabbat (April 30, 2022), I had the privilege to lead a newly-opened explanatory prayer service at Congregation Beth Aaron in Teaneck, New Jersey. The service is dedicated to the memory of Andy Dimond, who passed away last year. Raised in a largely secular Jewish family, Andy became observant in his adulthood and was deeply dedicated to inspiring others religiously.

It is striking that in a highly observant community as Teaneck, there is a profound thirst for learning more about Torah and prayer. Some sixty people were in attendance, and we learned about the weekly Torah reading and prayer. It was inspiring to see so many people take the step to learn more about the services they attend regularly.

Here is a summary of the main talk I gave, pertaining to the value of an explanatory service and the goals of prayer.

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Prayer is hard! Even for those of us who attend synagogue services regularly, there are a number of fundamental impediments to prayer.

For many, the Hebrew language is a barrier. Despite the fact that Jewish law permits prayer in any language one understands, our public prayers are recited in Hebrew.

Although thanking God can be understood as an expression of good manners and gratitude, what do words of praise and petition actually achieve? Furthermore, we pray from a fixed text, and recite the same prayers whether at times of great joy or when we are beset by crisis.

For many, analysis is more stimulating than prayer, making Torah study a more meaningful religious encounter. The same holds true for acts of *tzedakah* and *hesed* toward others, where we immediately feel a sense of religious fulfillment.

While we may confront different challenges than did earlier generations, our struggle to attain religious devotion is hardly a uniquely modern problem. Let us consider one remarkable passage from the Jerusalem Talmud:

> R. Hiyya said, “I never concentrated during prayer in all my days! Once I wanted to concentrate, but I thought about who will meet the king first: [a Persian high official] or the Exilarch.” Shemuel said, “I count chicks.” R. Bun b. Hiyya said, “I count bricks.” R. Matnaya said, “I am grateful to my head, because it bows by itself when I reach *Modim* (*Berakhot* 2:4, 16a).

One commentary entitled *Toledot Yitzhak* (by Rabbi Yitzhak Karo, the brother of Rabbi Yosef Karo) remarks that the Talmud teaches that even the greatest Sages struggled with the issue of proper intention and focus during prayer. Their struggles should inspire us to improve our focus, and not to despair when we find prayer difficult.

In addition to our efforts, we need God’s help to pray. We begin each Amidah with the introductory petition: “O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise” (Psalms 51:17). We pray to God to enable us to pray! Once we recognize some of the inherent challenges in prayer, we may begin to address those challenges and enhance our ability to pray.

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One of the most incredible aspects of seeing a starry night is the concept of light years. We are looking at the stars right now, but we see one star as it appeared 20 years ago, another as it appeared 40 years ago, another as it appeared 100 years ago, and so on. It creates a staggering feeling of time-transcendence.

The prayer book offers a similar phenomenon. It is an anthology of sacred texts, which includes passages from the Torah, later books of the Bible incorporated in the Prophets and the Holy Writings, Mishnah, Talmud, the medieval period, sixteenth-century mystical traditions—all the way to prayers for the modern State of Israel. When we pray, we engage God in a relationship right now, but we also transcend time by seamlessly moving through the set order of prayers.

Engagement with the traditional prayer book connects us with communities everywhere and all time. Without this fixed text, we would have lost our shared identity long ago.

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The great mystic Rabbi Hayyim Vital (1542-1620), upon entering the synagogue, would say, “I now am ready to fulfill the commandment of loving my neighbor as myself.” Although the commandment “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) is a celebrated tenet of the Torah, it seems surprising that Rabbi Vital would call attention to this commandment in the particular context of prayer.

Rabbi Vital teaches a profound lesson about prayer. Communal prayer creates shared lives, built around God, the Torah, education, and community service. Prayers express our greatest ideas and ideals. If we truly can pray, we truly can love others on the highest plane.

A great measure of the success of a prayer service is how people behave outside of the synagogue in day-to-day life. Are we bringing religious values to every aspect of our lives? Are we more sensitive, better people?

Learning to pray requires making ourselves vulnerable to accept that we need help praying. It inspires us to transcend ourselves and our time and connect to eternity. And it prods us to look beyond the walls of our synagogues to develop religious and communal engagement in all areas of our lives.