

The Possibilities of Prayer

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

What is prayer? What converts reading, chanting or singing into prayer? Words and melody in and of themselves are not enough to constitute prayer.

It is *kavanah* which converts the reading or singing into prayer. It is the intention to communicate with G-d, or the devotion with which the words are sung or recited that transforms the words into prayer. We require a connection, a contact, a feeling of genuine communication, an emotional tie, in order to reach the true level of *kavanah* in prayer.

How do we achieve this level of *Kavanah*? While it might sound trite, the first requirement is to believe in G-d. Without such faith, one may meditate and reach levels of spirituality devoid of deity.

Although understanding the meaning of the words and texts in our prayers is paramount, the melody or *niggun* itself may be enough to establish the mood or *Kavanah* - this is evidenced by the approach of the *Chassidim*, and often by non-Jews themselves who comment on their emotional religious experience at a Jewish Prayer Service, without any understanding of the texts.

We need to establish an intention to become emotionally in communication with G-d - to forge a spiritual tie with Him. Closing our eyes, putting the *Tallit* over our heads, "shokeling" and swaying while concentrating deeply are ways of reaching the proper level of communication.

The music or melody by itself may achieve the goal - just try to imagine a service with no melody whatsoever. Picture yourself in shul on *Kol Nidrei* night if the *Chazzan* were to read the *Kol Nidrei* prayer instead of singing it to the traditional chant known to all Ashkenazi Jews the world over. The constant repetition of the same words and melody, for some, will lead them to reach G-d. The *Chassidim* have been very successful with this approach.

In many cases, the appeal to people's real feelings and emotions on a very personal level will "do the trick" - at times of extreme joy or sickness or distress, the moment and the melody may combine to create the devotion. The *Shehecheyanu* prayer, the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer for the sick, and the *Keil Malei Rachamim* memorial prayer are examples of this.

Even the *Chazzan* himself, depending upon how effectively and sincerely he is chanting, may lead the Congregation to connect with G-d. The Sages tell us: "*D'varim hayotz'im min halev, nichnasim el halev* - "Words which emanate from the heart, penetrate the heart."

The mesmerizing process of transporting ourselves to another space and realm is what we are trying to achieve in our effort to pray with *kavanah*. How do we know when we've reached the Royal Realm of The Creator? You'll always know when you are there. I do.