

## **Purify our Hearts to serve You in Truth**

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

Recently I spent the day in the recording studio doing the vocals on the last three numbers of my new CD, entitled "Creations in Rhythm" — a collection of my own music. Before I sing each piece, since the lyrics are in Hebrew, it is my custom to explain the words, and my interpretation of the meaning through the music, to the producer and engineer, who are not Jewish. One of the pieces which I recorded is "*Kad'sheinu*" with the repetition of the words: *V'taheir Libeinu L'ovd'cha Be-emet* - "and purify our hearts to serve You in truth."

I wonder whether there is a better example of economy of words in our liturgy than this one to express such profound ideas. This prayer is included in every *Amidah* for Shabbat and Festivals. Why is this prayer recited only on Shabbat and Festivals and not on weekdays?

Judaism believes that we are born pure and innocent, free from all sin and evil. However, throughout our lives this purity of the heart becomes contaminated by our unworthy thoughts and actions. During the week, when we are engrossed in work, this process of spiritual contamination is most likely to occur. It is as if a layer of foreign matter forms over our hearts and detracts from the true service of G-d. Then comes the Shabbat — with the diminution, or if possible, the cessation of these worldly tasks and concerns. With the peace and purity of the Shabbat comes the prayer that these foreign elements, which have attached themselves to our hearts during the week, be removed so that we may restore our hearts to purity and serve G-d in truth.

Freedom of will is one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism. Without that belief, the whole concept of both human and divine justice, of reward and retribution becomes untenable. In Deuteronomy Ch. 30, v. 19 we read: "I have set before thee life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life." A statement like this would be senseless if human beings had no free will, and all their actions were determined for them. The Rabbis tell us: "Everything is in the hands of heaven, save for the fear of heaven," and people choose their own way entirely by their own volition. But despite this, in our prayers we continually turn to G-d to do what Judaism believes is in the hands of humans, and not in the power of the Almighty. For example, we pray to G-d to -

"purify our hearts to serve Thee in truth";  
"guard my tongue from evil, and my lips from speaking guile";  
"let not the evil inclination sway us from doing good."

There are many, many more examples of such requests within our liturgy. How is this apparent inconsistency resolved? Our Rabbis tell us: "he who undertakes the process of purification, receives help from G-d." In other words, if the petition concerns the worshipper himself/herself and is absolutely sincere, its very expression sets its fulfillment into motion. Let's take the angry father who prays for a better temper in dealing with his children. If the prayer comes sincerely from within him, his prayer will be answered - G-d will help him to deal with his children with kindness.

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There is a big difference between the prayers: "G-d make me do something," and "G-d give me something."

In the first case we are asking G-d to give us added strength to put ourselves to the test. Despite our inclination to do otherwise, let us rather do what we know is right. If we make up our minds to guard our tongues from evil, G-d will help us along the way to achieve that. Of course, this applies to the observance of all *mitzvot*. If we decide henceforth to observe a particular mitzvah on Shabbat, and sincerely want to achieve our goal, we should start the observance and *Hashem's* assistance will be forthcoming. In the prayer *V' taheir Libeinu* we are put to the test — we must accept the challenge. If we make up our minds to purify our hearts and serve G-d in truth, Divine help will guide us.