

Praying as a Community

One of the thoughts I often hear about prayer is “Why do I have to come to a synagogue to pray? Can’t God hear me no matter where I am? I prefer to pray by myself or with my family in my own way!” The question is, why do we need to come to services on Shabbat to pray?

As those of you who have studied with me know, Judaism is more than a religion. We are also a people. And as a people, our relationship with one another is as critical and important as our relationship with the Holy One. You can be a “Jew-by-choice” but you cannot be a “Jew-by-self!” By specifying that certain prayers (especially the Mourners’ Kaddish) be said only in a community of no less than ten, our tradition requires that no matter how alone we feel, how reluctant we are to join with others, we must get ourselves into our Jewish community. Moreover, even when we are feeling pretty good about our relationship with God, we recognize that there will be others this Shabbat that need the support and comfort of community that is provided by our presence.

It’s not that God needs our prayers. We need to be the kind of people that pray. The Hebrew verb to pray is *L’hitpalel* which is a reflexive verb that literally means to judge one’s self. I suspect that God can do very well without our prayers but we need to recognize that there are things beyond our control and beyond our abilities.

The major barrier to Shabbat attendance may be a feeling of discomfort with the prayer service. Not knowing Hebrew and when to stand and when to sit (not to mention when to bow) may make the most confident and accomplished adult feel like an insecure child again. The good news is that, in our new prayerbook, there is a transliteration to each and every prayer to help those of us not so comfortable with the Hebrew. I also try to go out of my way to explain the key prayers and their historical significance as well as how they fit into the service as a whole.

Judaism provides for a wonderful blend of fixed and spontaneous prayer in private and communal settings. It forces us to see the blessings in our lives and respond with thanks. It provides a sacred, supportive setting for us in our moments of joy and despair. If you are a Jew, you do not have the right to remain silent!