

Personal the Power Pr



By SARA LEHMANN

Zippering of Prayer

I once bought myself a mug with the inscription “Prayer Changes Things.” It is still my favorite mug, despite a slight chip on top from several years of use. It is a daily reminder that, indeed, prayer changes things.

I have learned that prayer also changes. At least mine has over the years.

From the time I celebrated my *siddur* party, many, many years ago, the routine of my *davening* has seemed to ebb and flow. Depending on the moment and the circumstances, it varies from zipping, rather by rote, from one *tefillah* to the next, with my mind barely skimming the edge of the *tefillah*’s meaning, to intense concentration on the words and their connotation.

I venture to state that I am not alone in this mode of prayer. Someone once confided in me that much to his chagrin, some of his most creative ideas pop into his head while he recites *Shemoneh Esrei*.

Naturally, as I got older, my *davening* became more consequential. As cliché as it sounds, *tefillah* has truly become a refuge for me in times of need. As personal wishes and demands grow, so does my reliance on beseeching Hashem to fulfill them.

If a health crisis arises, whether in my family or someone else’s, my knee-jerk reaction is to reach for *Sefer Tehillim*. The search for *shidduchim* for my children has led to my participation in daily *Tehillim* groups. I have since added the names of others looking for a *shidduch* to my regular *Tehillim* repertoire.

October 7 and its aftermath prompted an even greater dependence on the power of *tefillah*. The horror of the devastation in Israel, the depth of the enemy’s depravity and the incomprehensible antisemitic response from the world, evoked a strong sense of vulnerability. It spurred a vastly reduced credence in human capability and a deeper trust in Hashem. And, of course, a greater reliance on the power of prayer.

But not every day is fraught with the necessity for urgent *tefillos*. The bulk of our *davening* is set against the backdrop of mundane living. The threat

of parroting *tefillah* lies in its very regularity.

It often takes herculean efforts to advance beyond unvaried repetition of daily *tefillah*. While I am not always up to the task, I have the potential to change my *tefillah* from humdrum to something far more meaningful. I owe this potential in large part to the many people who have unwittingly changed the dynamics of my prayer.

These people, wholly unaware of how they have impacted me, have caused my *davening* to evolve over time. Not only has my daily routine gained in import, but it has expanded. Literally.

I can track the first change to my first year of marriage. My husband relayed a story that changed his *davening* and consequently changed mine.

My husband used to work for a company in Lower Manhattan. To get to work on time, he would *daven Shacharis* at the Young Israel of Fifth Avenue in Chelsea on West 16th Street. The same people came to *minyan* regularly, and everyone had a *makom kavua*.

The man who sat behind my husband each morning was very heavyset. Right before *Modim D'Rabbanan*, he would grab hold of the wooden bench in front of him to lift himself up and bow. It took great effort on his part; my husband would be jolted backward as his seat shook under the strain of his fellow *mispallel's* exertion.

Being accustomed to sit while bowing during *Modim D'Rabbanan*, my husband found this daily occurrence disturbing. At the same time,

he marveled at this *mispallel*, whose labor sometimes left him panting. My husband had a choice. He said to himself at the time, "I can continue to lurch in my seat each morning or stand up myself. If this overweight man could yank himself up, so could I." And he did.

When I heard this story, I told myself that I would start standing during *Modim D'Rabbanan* too. Up until then, I had also sat while bowing. This anonymous man inspired me to change course, and as a result, all our children naturally stand as well.

Many years later, I was at the *levayah* of Shlomo Zakheim, *z"l*, whose late father, Rabbi Yaakov Zakheim, *zt"l*, was the Rav of the shul we first joined when we moved to Brooklyn. Tragically, Shlomo died young after a long illness.

Someone gave a *hesped* detailing Shlomo's incredible dedication to *davening*, despite his sickness. As weak as he was, he never missed saying the verses of *Ani Maamin* at the conclusion of *Shacharis*.

Having never said *Ani Maamin* myself, such devotion and physical exertion singularly impressed me. It also piqued my interest.

I remember returning from the *levayah*, opening a *siddur* and reading through the 13 *Ikarim* of the Rambam, which form the fundamental basis of our faith. I never finished *Shacharis* again without saying them.

More recently, I was speaking with a friend about the difficulty of saying the morning *brachos* with proper concentration. She told me that a Rebbetzin she knew, who was very *makpid* to say these *brachos* with *kavanah*, had advised her to pause between the phrases of each *brachah*. This would prevent garbling the words and turning them into one long, inarticulate sentence.

I have no idea who this Rebbetzin is. However, by following her advice, I have since avoided saying my morning *brachos* by rote. In particular, pronouncing the words "*Baruch Atah Hashem*" distinctly has underscored for me the very essence of to Whom we direct our prayers.

Then there is my son's inadvertent enhancement of my *tefillah*. Several

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years ago, on a trip to Israel, he went with his father-in-law to meet Harav Gamliel Rabinowitz, *shlita*, in Yerushalayim.

I asked my son what they spoke about. He said, "Rav Gamliel told me, 'Don't say *Aleinu* as if it's *Tefillas Haderech*.'"

Well, I thought upon hearing this, *unfortunately, that is exactly what I often do*. And I took it upon myself to follow Rav Gamliel's secondhand advice. I now force myself to slow down and articulate each word of *Aleinu*, no matter what kind of rush I might be in.

My daughter-in-law is another family member who has had a positive influence on my prayers. A while back, I relayed to her my frustration about someone who owed me money; my chances of being paid back seemed slim. She told me she had once heard that *bentching* with real *kavanah* is an auspicious method of being vouchsafed *parnassah*.

I resolved then and there to stop zipping through *bentching*. I have yet to be paid back, but I am confident that my resolution will yield dividends in other areas. If nothing else, I have discovered new significance in the words I use to thank Hashem for the food He provides — which I hadn't focused on since singing them as a child.

Bentching underwent another modification when my father, *z"l*, passed away 15 years ago. My brother-in-law had lost his father several years before. At a Shabbos meal, he spoke about how he maintains the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av* by saying the *brachah* for his parents in *bentching* with a twist: He

says, "*Harachaman Hu yevarech es avi mori b'Gan Eden*."

Wow, I thought to myself, *what a beautiful and sensitive way to bless my father on a regular basis*.

When my mother, *a"h*, passed away six months ago, I adjusted the *brachah* to include her. It is a daily opportunity to remember and honor my parents, though they are no longer here.

In the introduction to *Rav Schwab on Prayer*, Harav Shimon, *zt"l*, writes, "We know that our daily prayers were established by the Sages to correspond to the daily *tamid* sacrifice (*Berachos* 26a)... Our *tefillah* makes it possible for a person to come close to Hashem, just as a *korban* — which comes from the word *karov* — brings a person close to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*."

Closeness with our Creator may be an end result of the process of *tefillah*. But the process itself is just as constructive. The *Kuzari* states that "prayer is for his soul what nourishment is for his body" (*Kuzari* 3:5).

Prayer nourishes my soul in such a way that whether or not my requests to Hashem are fulfilled, the very notion that I have the ability to beseech Him is comforting in itself. The process, with its potential for spiritual edification, has become as beneficial for me as the anticipated results.

This process has become immeasurably more significant due to the inspiration drawn from others over the years. Most of these people will never know how grateful I am to them for altering the mechanics of my daily liturgy and for sparking additions to it.

We all have the facility to influence others for better or for worse. Oftentimes, we do it unsuspectingly. We never know who is watching or listening, or how our speech and actions may be interpreted and then applied to the lives of others. Such influences can persist for generations, as I hope the positive influences on my prayer will.

So, to the many people who have transformed and elevated so much of my *tefillah*, I say, "Thank you." May your own *tefillas* be *mekuyam l'tovah*. ■