

DANCING With GOD

How to Connect with God
Every Time You Pray

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HONG KONG · JERUSALEM · LAS VEGAS

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Who has not felt the yearning to seek God, to come closer to Him¹, especially in times of crisis when we often find there is nowhere else to turn? We desperately want and need to connect to God, to know we are not alone—that there is something, some One beyond ourselves watching over us, Who cares. This is what every soul hungers for. And prayer is the chief path we have been given.

Truth be told, however, most people have a hard time creating a meaningful prayer experience. Perhaps this is because prayer is not a function of the lips, nor even the mind—but of the heart. Many wonder if their prayers really matter or if their prayers are even heard because they cannot escape the feeling, no matter how hard they might pray, that something is missing. Some turn to the synagogue to find God. But we cannot expect to just walk into *shul* (synagogue) and find God there, because to find God in *shul*, we must first find Him in our hearts.

So how do we get there? How do we really connect with God so that our prayers move from the head to the heart? In its wisdom, Jewish tradition has created what can only be understood as a dance that, if done properly, can lift the participant into an intimate encounter with the Divine.

How is Jewish prayer a dance? One sits and stands, moves one's hands, moves backward and forward, bows and rises up; one chants and sings and embraces God. Each movement is pregnant with meaning. Taken together Jewish prayer is nothing short of a most intimate dance with the Creator.

The task of this book is to help the reader learn how to dance in such a way that he will connect with God every time he prays. Yes, every time!

This book has been written to help the beginner navigate the sea of Jewish liturgy and immediately find meaning in his

prayer experience. It has also been written to help the seasoned *davener*, who may know most of the *Siddur* (Jewish prayer book) by heart, find the connection to God that has eluded him. I have included the texts of the prayers, and Biblical and Talmudic quotes to enhance its use in the classroom for adult education, high schools and universities. The liturgy that is explored in this book is mostly trans-denominational and can be found in prayer books of the Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements.

If you frequently pray, think about your current prayer experience. How well is it working for you? If it is not working as well as you would like then read on. And if you do not pray often, know this book will speak to you.

It is my humble opinion that such a book is very much needed—for the beginner as well as for those fluent in Jewish prayer—because, after all, connecting with God is the primary function of prayer. What follows is a handbook for how to make the connection real.

I remember as a little boy in Talmud Torah, my teachers would drill us every day in the reading of the prayers. We even had contests with prizes for who could read the *Amidah* and the *Shema* (the two main prayers in the Jewish liturgy) the fastest. Yes, I developed a fluency with these prayers but I had little, if any, understanding of their significance or spiritual power.

It is told that the Kotzker Rebbe once asked a group of rabbis with whom he was meeting, “Where is God to be found?” His answer, after entertaining some of the responses, is as profound as it is instructive: “God can be found wherever you let him in.” Judaism insists every human being can find a path to God—Jew or non-Jew, secular or religious. We were all created in the image of God. God gave each of us a holy eternal soul that yearns to cleave to Him.

But how? How do we let Him in? How do we dance with God?

I have spent my entire spiritual journey—my whole life—

searching for answers, and I believe I have rediscovered a path mostly ignored in our time—a path to help you give proper focus to your prayers and, at the same time, fill you with God’s holy light. Some of the meditative exercises in this book may seem strange—especially for those who do not have much experience using meditative techniques in prayer. Please do not skip or ignore these. Give each exercise a serious trial of several tries even if you are not completely comfortable at first. The exercises will lead you to feel the connection, and you cannot fake feeling!

And so again I ask you to think about how you currently pray. How well is it working for you? Do you feel the presence of the *Shechina*, the indwelling Presence of God, when you pray? Have you given up on regular prayer?

The need to pray is woven into the spiritual DNA of the Jew. Isaac Leib Peretz, the great Yiddish writer, tells a touching story about Berel the tailor—a simple and pious Jew—and his son, who has just become a doctor.²

The young man comes to visit Papa Berel in the *shtetl* and Berel asks him to come to *shul* (synagogue) on Shabbos morning. The young man refuses and asks, “Papa, if you knew that our neighbor, the widow, needed help, would you wait to give help until she came begging?”

“Of course not,” replies Berel. “I’d help the moment I knew her need.”

And the son says, “Well, God certainly knows when His creatures need help. He doesn’t have to wait for us to come begging.”

“True,” says Berel, “but asking for God’s help is not the only reason we pray. We have to praise Him, too.”

“Papa,” says the doctor, “how would you like it if someone were to keep praising you to your face all the time with ‘Berel is a marvelous tailor. Berel is the only tailor. Berel is the greatest tailor!’”

“It would make me sick,” says Berel.

“You see,” the doctor adds, “God is greater and wiser than we are. Do you think He needs or wants our constant praise?”

Berel nods thoughtfully, “You’re right, absolutely right.” And then he brightens, “But a Jew has to *daven*, doesn’t he?”

A Jew has to *daven*, a Jew has to pray! This is in his *kishkes*, his guts. It is a hunger of the soul, an outpouring of longing for God, a yearning to connect with our Creator, to feel He is there listening and watching over us. The need to pray is, of course, universal. Human beings are not only thinking creatures but also praying creatures. The secularization of modern society may have suppressed this need, but it is still there—just under the surface. It is my humble prayer that this book will be a useful tool for the reader to connect and dance with God his Maker.

Why is prayer so hard? Again, it is because prayer is a function of the heart—not of the lips, nor the mind. To pray is to feel, and feelings cannot be mechanically manufactured by reading a script of prayers. And for this reason the *Talmud*³ implores us: “Do not pray as if you were reading a letter.”

Within the pages of this book you will find a path to not only come to a greater understanding and appreciation of Jewish liturgy, but a path within the script of the prayers to open your heart and find God. Come with me on an amazing life-changing journey as you begin your dance with God—a dance that can last a lifetime.

Cautionary note: Please take note the use of God’s Names both in the Hebrew and English translations—as in the use of “God”—and transliterations in this book. This book, therefore, must be treated with the proper respect this engenders, like not taking it into inappropriate places, such as bathrooms. Also please note, for the sake of consistency throughout the book, except in gender-specific examples or stories, both male and female readers will be referred by the general use of the pronouns “he” and “his.”

IN APPRECIATION

God has blessed me with significant teachers and mentors at different stages in my life, and I have been privileged to taste the holy waters of the well of their Torah—people like Rabbi Michael Katz, Rabbi Benjamin Blech, Rabbi Gedalia Fleer, Rabbi Mordecai Goldstein and Ilan Feldman. Much of what is contained in this book I have learned from them, and I am forever grateful. God has blessed me and enabled me to help others in their spiritual journeys by sharing with them some of what I have learned; and these students, as well as my generous teachers and mentors, in turn, have urged me to write this book. I pray that as you read and use the insights and suggestions that follow, new pathways to God may open for you as well.

The editing of this book has been a major challenge for several reasons, not the least is the use of English, Hebrew and Hebrew transliterations interspersed throughout. I am eternally indebted to the following who were crucial to the editing process: Phyllis Fraley, Gedalia Fleer, Dr. David Blumenthal, Dr. Melvin Konner, Cheryl Tobin Kunis, Chaim Natan Firszt, Ashirah Yosefah and Esther Cameron. I offer a special thanks to Rabbi Avraham Sutton for the Hebrew prayer texts. A special thank-you is to Alicia Kay Gelfond-Holtz for the cover picture. May Hashem bless all of you for your efforts.

Why Am I Here?

Everyone's spiritual journey eventually must come to the basic question that we all ask, but so little has been written about: Why am I here? Why did God create me with my talents and deficiencies, born to my parents in the time and place I was born? Why did He create some people with brilliant minds and others with developmental disabilities? Why are some musically talented and others artistically talented? Why are some people rich and others poor? You can easily ask a dozen more "whys." Who hasn't asked, at some time or another, "Why am I here?" The answer is very deep and profound, and knowing it should make a profound difference in how you live your life.

According to Kabbalah,¹¹ when God created the world, He also created all the souls that will ever be. One by one He places a particular soul into a particular body. Why?

God put your soul into your body, with all its talents and deficiencies, born to your parents in the time and place you were born, because these were the optimum conditions necessary for the development or growth of your soul or as Kabbalah puts it, *tikun hanefesh* (repair of the soul).¹² The purpose of life, therefore, is not to be happy—although this is what most parents want for their children. The purpose of life is to develop and perfect your soul!¹³

And perfecting your soul is virtually impossible in the world of the souls. You cannot be compassionate in the world of the souls, for no one there needs your help. You cannot resist temp-

tation in the world of the souls, for there is no temptation. It is only here in this world, when our lives seem to be falling apart all around us, that we can demonstrate the growth and development of our souls by reaching out and helping someone else with their pain, with their suffering.

About 38 years ago, Dr. Raymond Moody Jr. published his groundbreaking work, *Life After Life*.¹⁴ There were similar works published around the same time, but his became an underground best seller introducing the world to what became known as the “near death experience.” Since then we have been inundated with books, movies, television shows, magazine articles, etc. all describing this experience which has been documented some ten thousand times. In almost every case, a person who is clinically dead—without breath or heartbeat—separates from and hovers over his own body. He may see others trying to revive him. He goes through a long dark tunnel toward an amazing light. When he reaches the light he sees a group of familiar people, who have previously died, coming to greet him. He then sees a panorama of his life unfold before him like a movie. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love and peace and wants to stay, but he is told that it is not his time and he must go back.¹⁵

When Moody¹⁶ interviewed people who had these experiences, he asked if they had any regrets about how they had lived when they saw the panorama of their lives unfolding before them. All of them responded that they mostly regretted not sufficiently understanding “the importance of two things in life: learning to love other people and acquiring knowledge.” In fact, many of them subsequently changed their lives to pursue more learning and acts of love towards their fellow human beings. Why are these pursuits so crucial? Because these are essential ingredients of soul growth and development, which is the main purpose of life!

If God then created each of us to develop and perfect our souls, then let us ask an even bigger question: Why did God create the world? I will answer this question in Kabbalistic terms and its answer may surprise you.

God created the world because He “willed” to have an opportunity to display His goodness.¹⁷ It makes no sense to speak of God “needing” anything, for God has no needs. In order to display His goodness it was necessary to create a being as much like Him as possible. God’s display of His goodness would then be revealed in the subsequent relationship with that being.

The sages of the Talmud¹⁸ compare it to a calf and its mother: “More than the calf wants to suckle, the cow wants to provide it with milk.” God wants, more than anything, to shower His love upon us. What it all adds up to is that God wants a relationship with us so that He can be good to us! Remarkable!

Scientists tell us the universe was created with a “Big Bang.” At first, everything was energy and then there was this Big Bang and from a spot no larger than the period at the end of this sentence that energy flowed out into the world and all the solar systems and stars then emanated from it. This all leads to a very religious idea: that there was a beginning to our world. And this beautifully coincides with the Kabbalistic point of view that everything was created from God’s loving energy.¹⁹ As the Psalmist teaches,²⁰ *Ki amarti, olam chesed yibaneh* (I have said the world is built of love).

Kabbalah teaches that in order to create the world, God had to do a *tzimtzum*. *Tzimtzum* is a Hebrew word meaning “contraction.” Is it a coincidence that human beings are born with contractions as well? Hardly.

Kabbalah teaches that before creation there was no room for the world because God’s Light filled everything.²¹ God had to contract himself in order to make room for the world. Rabbi Joseph Soleveichik²² makes the exquisite point that this creation story is a model for our relationships. If we are so full of ourselves that there is no room for anyone else in our lives, how can we possibly have a relationship with anyone? As Rabbi David Aaron expresses it in his book *Endless Light*:²³ “In order to love, you need to withdraw yourself from the center and create a space for an *other*. Love starts only when you do that—move your self

out of the way to make room for another person in your life.” All relationships require a *tzimtzum* to be meaningful.

What God expects from us, beyond all else, is a relationship. Wow! Keeping the laws of the Torah and our traditions, isn't this what God expects of us? Yes, that is true, but only because God's laws are an expression of His love for us. The Torah is God's guide for a better life. It is, as my friend the scholar Rabbi Yaakov Fogelman z"l describes, "God's factory-authorized manual" for how to be in this relationship. And our traditions are an expression of our love for God. By embellishing the Law's requirements, our traditions demonstrate our love. The minutiae of Jewish law and tradition are also, if understood in this context, a dance of love that we do with our Creator.

The Three Pathways

A *l sh'losa d'varim ha-olam omeyd: al haTora, v'al ha-avoda, v'al g'milut chasadim.* (The world stands upon three things: upon Torah, upon worship, and upon acts of *chesed*, loving kindness.) This is the formula, according to the Talmud,²⁴ upon which the continued existence of the world depends. These three foundations are so important, that if for one moment no one was studying Torah, or praying or doing acts of *chesed*, God would withdraw His support and the world might then fall apart. The main point of the Talmud is that the continued existence of mankind, created in the image of God, would be severely threatened if we allowed the world to deteriorate to the point where these three fundamental pathways to God, and thereby God Himself, were ignored. What a blessing it is that God—Who cannot be seen, heard or felt—has given us a formula to connect with Him. And not just coincidentally, it also happens to be a formula for spiritual health and balance. Kabbalah teaches that the *neshama*, the human soul, is a microcosm of the world. And so by extension, if the study of Torah, worship and acts of *chesed* are fundamental to the existence of the world, these, too, are critical to the existence and health of the soul. If there is a sense of emptiness in your life, if despite all the material things you have acquired there is a gnawing feeling in your gut that something is missing, then you need to get your soul into a state of spiritual balance, and that balance can only be achieved by making these three pathways a major focus of your life. You can achieve a state of enlightenment

and connection with God through any one of those paths. But spiritual balance can only be achieved when sufficient attention is given to all three.

The greatest degree of intimacy with God usually comes through worship, and therefore, worship is the major focus of this book.²⁵ But let me leave you with a word about the other two—the study of Torah and acts of *chesed*.

AL HA TORAH (UPON TORAH): Why is Torah study so essential?

In the ancient pagan world—before the Torah was given—the texts that were holy to them were kept secret by priestly clans. If one wanted to know what the gods expected of him, he would ask the priest who would consult the sacred writings and tell him. As you might guess, this led to much confusion, corruption and even abuse.

The Torah, on the other hand, was made available to all. In fact, it was a sacred obligation for everyone to study Torah so that each person would learn for himself what God expects of him and how he could make proper moral judgments.

You might ask: Can atheists not be good and moral people? I once asked an atheist who claims to have a high moral standard, why he doesn't steal. He responded that it is for the good of society that people refrain from stealing. Then I asked him, if he were very hungry would he then feel it was proper to steal some food? "Yes," he said, "that is different because I would need to eat." But put the same questions to a religious Jew, Moslem or Christian, and the response would be that scripture teaches us, "Thou shalt not steal!" Unless one's life is in danger, one does not steal. Why? Because this is what God expects from us. One cannot justify immoral behavior merely to relieve one's own discomfort.

Ethical relativism—the idea that there are no moral absolutes, no moral rights and wrongs—is very popular today in defending criminal behavior. It has no place in a truly moral world. It reminds me of the story of the shopkeeper who remarked to

his friend that he faced a moral dilemma. He told his friend that someone had come into the store to purchase something and had mistakenly given him a hundred dollar bill instead of a ten. He did not notice the error until some time later. “I see,” said the friend, “your dilemma is whether or not to return the hundred dollars to the customer.”

“Oh no,” said the shopkeeper, “of course I’ll keep the money. My moral dilemma is whether or not to tell my partner about it!”

The ongoing study of Torah is essential in order to constantly be aware of what God expects from us. But this pathway to God goes much deeper—to the very core of our souls. I often ask students who study Torah to notice how they feel after a Torah study session. It may seem like a strange question to ask, but try it. Notice how you feel after a good session of Torah study. “Good, elevated, inspired,” are among the many responses I have received. Some even report a noticeable physical difference. Why? It is because the truths of Torah resonate to the very core of one’s soul, and in fact, animate our souls. And when our souls—that image of God in each of us—become animated, we feel a profound connection with our Creator.

The Torah is the word of God, and when we study it, we hear the voice of God speaking to us! In a discussion with Rabbi Shimon Greene of Yeshiva Birkas HaTorah in Jerusalem about the benefits of studying Talmud, the Oral Torah, he took this a step further: “Studying Talmud—with its development of life’s core issues and the weighing of the different facets of the Torah’s response—is like entering into the mind of God.” It is amazing! When we study Torah, we have the capacity, on some mystical level, to enter into the mind of God. This can be a profound connection! That is why the study of Torah is a major pathway to God.

G’MILUT CHASADIM (ACTS OF CHESED, LOVING KINDNESS).

Chesed is the Hebrew word for “love.” But *chesed* is not really romantic love, although romantic love to endure needs *chesed*

at its core. Romantic love is better served by the Hebrew word *ahava*. *Chesed* is an altruistic love, a love that comes from a sense of overwhelming kindness. It is a love for your fellow human being, given without a thought of being repaid or being loved in kind. A relationship based on *chesed* is a relationship that can be sustained, unlike a relationship based on self-interest.

Abraham is the archetype of *chesed* in Jewish tradition and the paradigm story in the Torah of *chesed* is the story of Abraham and the three angels.²⁶ Abraham is sitting in his tent recuperating from his circumcision when God pays him a visit.²⁷ *Vayeyra Eylav Hashem* (God appeared to Abraham.) He is in the presence of God—a state most spiritual masters would say is the highest spiritual level a human being can possibly achieve. Suddenly he sees off in the distance three strangers approaching. *Vayaratz likratam* (and he ran to greet them), saying in effect to God, “Sorry God. I don’t mean to be rude, but I have more important things to do right now. I have to take care of these men. Don’t go away; I’ll see you later.”

What a *Chutzpa!* If the President of the United States or the Prime Minister of Israel called you, would you put either of them on hold while you took care of other errands? Is that not what Abraham does with God in this story? What could be more important than communing with God, especially when He comes to visit? But for Abraham, despite the pain of his recuperation, extending himself to help a fellow human being in need takes precedence even over his very intimate encounter with God. From this the sages comment, *Gedolat hachnasat orchim mikabalat p’ney haShechina* (Greater is hospitality to wayfarers than receiving the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence).²⁸

In other words, when we reach out to help our fellow human beings in need, despite all the personal problems we face, despite the fact that we may be hurting as well, we become an extension of God on earth. It is almost a merging with God, which can be a very powerful pathway to Him. It also helps us achieve a powerful sense of self-worth because when we engage in acts of *chesed*, we

know that our lives have not been wasted, that we have made a difference in the world.

This pathway is part of what Kabbalah refers to as *Tikun Olam* (repair of the world). Our acts of kindness and charity can help heal the world just as the study of Torah and prayer are acts of *Tikun Hanefesh* (repairing the soul) that we mentioned earlier. These two expressions of *tikun* (repair) are deeply connected because when one works to better the world, this invariably helps perfect one's soul. And when one works on perfecting one's soul, it will inevitably lead to acts of bettering the world.

Do you want a quick, easy recipe for adding spiritual balance to your life through acts of *chesed*? I was inspired once by something a colleague said. "Very simple, three times a week, do a special *mitzvah*; go out of your way to help someone. That is all it takes. Writing a check does not count. You really have to do it." It could be for someone you know, or a worthy organization or even becoming an activist for a worthy cause. At least three times a week, go out of your way, become God's hands and make a difference in this world. Don't make excuses and tell yourself that you are very busy. We are all busy! You find time to eat three times a day; you find time to watch your favorite television program; you find time to get to the gym. This will make you feel good faster and better than going to the gym, as you open this essential pathway and your soul merges with God. As an added incentive, King Solomon teaches us, *Tzedaka tatzil mimavet* (Charity can save one from death.)²⁹

The study of Torah and acts of *chesed*—both time-honored pathways to God—are critical to the health of the soul. But true intimacy with God can only be achieved through *avoda*, worship—deep prayer and meditation. The following chapters are meant as a guide, both for the novice and for one who prays regularly, for how to find intimacy with God through Jewish prayer.