

Prayer...the word may conjure up a range of emotions within us. In truth, prayer is a gift. It can give us what we need to attain a sense of balance in our lives. Our lives are so busy, with so many calls in so many directions. It's difficult not to feel overwhelmed. Prayer gives us that sacred time we need to s-l-o-w down and to process the direction our lives are taking. During Prayer, we say, "I am not going to be controlled by all this external noise. I am going to control my own destiny and live according to the way I know is right!"

TEFILLAH: PRAYER

Our Prayer Unit rests on these foundational ideas:

I am created for a reason; I have a unique role in the Master plan.

By reflecting on my choices (behavior), I ascertain whether I am best fulfilling my potential.

G-d loves me and cares for me like a parent for a child. I feel that love and devotion. I express that to G-d during formal Tefillah (prayer) times, and during spontaneous times throughout the day.

We pray together in a synagogue and draw strength from each other.

Why We Began with this Unit

The Wednesday course is entitled "Mitzvah Course". With so many options, why did we choose to begin with Prayer & Synagogue?

Whenever we select a unit of study, we take the context into account. This scholastic year (2008-09) offers a unique opportunity since we have quite a few weeks of school before the High Holiday season. Usually, Rosh Hashanah occurs almost immediately prior to the school opening, so we don't have the time to explore the concept of synagogue and prayer.

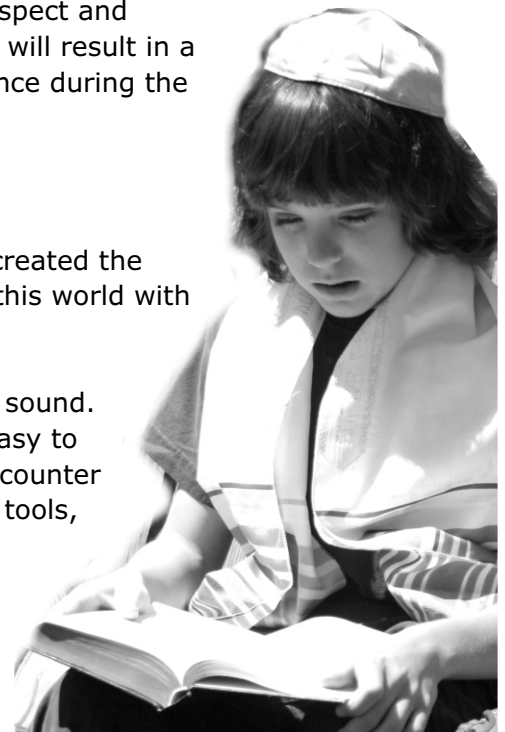
In this unit we focused on the power of *prayer*, and the *House* of Prayer (synagogue). Students will gain a basic understanding and familiarity with the goings-on of prayer and Torah Reading - its function, its ritual objects, and proper conduct in a synagogue.

Hopefully, this study will encourage the students to approach Tefillah with a newfound respect and recognize the gift that it truly is, and will result in a more meaningful synagogue experience during the High Holidays.

But What Is Tefillah?

Let's go back to the beginning...G-d created the world and gave us all a mission: Fill this world with goodness and G-dliness.

This mission is not as easy as it may sound. Life has many distractions and it is easy to veer off course. So, G-d says, "I will counter balance that challenge by giving you tools, the mitzvot. Each mitzvah, when performed with consciousness, will help steer you back on the path, and avoid distraction. One extra-special tool in this regard, is TEFILLAH (prayer)."



What is TEFILLAH? It is designated time to take a break from our busy lives and to stop and think. "Am I meeting my potential? Am I where I should be with regard to my actions, my thoughts, my speech? Do I treat people the way I should? Do I treat G-d the way I should? Do I fully use the gifts I was blessed with? Do I appreciate the gifts the world is filled with? Do I appreciate the Gift-Giver, G-d? Is there any support that I may need from G-d so that I can better self-actualize?"

TEFILLAH is not an easy task. In Talmud, it is referred to as "toil of the heart". Mysticism refers to it as "a time of war." Those descriptions are quite heavy! TEFILLAH is about self-reflection, introspection. Therapy for my soul. But I am my own therapist. I judge myself. I open my heart and soul. I look within, honestly, bravely. It is quite daunting. I hold my potential up to my actual and I see where I need to work on myself. It is quite an exhausting pursuit...I ask G-d to help me.

Through the exertions of the TEFILLAH exercise, we build spiritual muscle. The harder a look we take at ourselves, the stronger we become. It is like mountain climbing. It is strenuous. The TEFILLAH tool allows us to match ourselves against who we really want to be.

Why Is It an Added Benefit to Pray With a Group?

The TEFILLAH tool just described is a deeply personal pursuit. It is not a social exercise. That is why according to Halakha (Jewish law) men and woman don't sit together. We want to remain as internally focused as possible. (Although family-togetherness is a strong Jewish value, TEFILLAH is about *personal* growth and development.)

So, if TEFILLAH is such a personal exercise, why not do it alone? Why pray in a group?

Ambiance has such an affect on us. As we gather in a synagogue, in the company of others, each engaged in this very same internal process of self-reflection, and each acknowledging the gifts of G-d, we give energy to each other and to the process itself.

It is for this reason, too, that Jewish communities all throughout history have placed such an emphasis on building beautiful synagogues. The awesomeness of the physical structure matches the awesomeness of the Prayer exercise; the physical atmosphere lends support to the endeavor.

Why is the Liturgy Pre-determined?

The TEFILLAH Pursuit is quite complex. So, our rabbis chose for us which prayers will best accomplish this objective. It's sort of like a super-talented speech-writer providing us with a text and teaching us the inflections and tone so that we can best present our speech. The very words, the choreography, the structure and order all are designed by spiritual masters to maximize the TEFILLAH experience.

Saying the words of the prayers is extremely important, even if I don't understand them*. Just reciting the holy words fills the world with spiritual light. But, reciting the words by rote, on auto-pilot, without consciousness, cannot possibly achieve the potential of the exercise. To fully utilize the TEFILLAH tool, as we recite the words we *think* about its messages; I personalize the words by thinking about *my* life, *my* choices, *my* behaviors, how *I* am meeting my infinite potential.

*Of course, if I cannot read Hebrew, I can pray in any language.

Why do we read the Torah in Synagogue (Kriat HaTorah)?

The Torah is G-d communicating with us, outlining for us the tools we need for self-actualization. That is why we read the Torah every three days; we want to always be close to its message. In synagogue, during TEFILLAH, we synthesize these aspects. We study Torah as it sets the agenda for our lives. We engage in TEFILLAH to match ourselves up to that agenda.

By engaging in the TEFILLAH exercise, I build connections and strengthen relationships: With myself, with others, with my reason for creation. And, ultimately, with G-d.