

# Tehillim - The Original Prayer Book

Category: Devarim, Va'eschanan

*What is a spiritual way to show interest in our loved ones?*

## Prayers

Have you ever attended a prayer vigil for Israel? Jews throughout the world are constantly praying for Israel. We pray that there be no more rocket attacks, we pray that the endless fighting war should end, and we pray that the soldiers should make it home safely and that peace reign in the Middle East.

In this week's Parsha, Va'eschanan, we read about Moses' prayers to G-d begging to enter the land of Israel. Moses often prayed to G-d - which prayerbook did he use?

Today, most of the prayers recited at prayer vigils are from Tehillim, the book of Psalms.

Now, just this week, someone asked me: what is so special about Tehillim that we turn to it every time we have *tzaros*?

First, I pointed out to him that the prayerbook is mainly taken from the Tehillim. If you look at the bottom of the Siddur, you'll find that most of the sources cited are from Tehillim.

Then I posed my own question:

The prayers as we have them in the Siddur and Machzor were instituted by the Men of the Great Assembly. However, the Jewish custom to pray three times a day did not begin with the Great Assembly. The Talmud says that the Patriarchs instituted the three daily prayers. What then did Jews pray before the Siddur was composed?

Imagine Yom Kippur without a Machzor. Imagine, those Jews who did not travel to Jerusalem for the High Holidays and did not spend the day watching the High

Priest perform the sacred service in the Temple. What did they do all day? They still had to fast and they couldn't do any work, for Yom Kippur is even holier than Shabbat. Did they sit around playing Bridge?

The answer is Tehillim.

## **For Every Occasion**

Tehillim is the original Jewish prayer book. It includes prayers for every occasion.

Let's imagine that we are trying to find the proper prayer for different times of day:

For Mincha, we could use Chapter 141, "My prayer shall be... as the evening offering,"

At bedtime, one could have used Chapter 4, "I would lie down and sleep in peace for You, would keep me safe,"

And in the morning it would make sense to say chapter 5, "O Lord, in the morning You shall hearken to my voice."

There are many psalms that could be used as the Passover Haggadah. Chapters 78 and 106 are all about the Ten Plagues and the Exodus from Egypt.

For Yom Kippur, Chapter 106 sounds right, "We sinned with our forefathers; we committed iniquity and wickedness."

King David compiled all of these prayers for the Jewish people of all times. In fact, it is suggested that parts of the Tehillim existed long before the days of King David. The Midrash explains that for the entire twenty years that Jacob lived with Laban he didn't sleep. Instead, says Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, Jacob was continuously reciting the fifteen Songs of Ascents (Shir Hama'alot). Rabbi Shmuel ben Nahman even suggests that Jacob would recite the entire book of psalms.

The book of psalms also includes prayers composed by Moses - many chapters begin with the words, "Tefila l'Moshe" a prayer for Moses.

This means that over a thousand years before the official Siddur was composed the Tehillim served as our prayer book. And when the Men of the Great Assembly

took to the task of writing the Siddur they did not intend to replace the Tehillim. Rather, the Siddur is meant to be a supplemental prayer book, providing prayers only for specific occasions. It has prayers for morning and night, Shabbat and holidays, bedtime, travel and grace after meals.

However, if a one wants to offer a spontaneous prayer, whether it's thanks for a miracle or a flash of inspiration, he can't simply choose a prayer from the Siddur. You can't start saying the holiday amidah of "Atah Vechartanu" whenever you realize just how lucky we are to have been chosen by G-d. Whenever a Jew feels like praying more, he must still turn to the original prayer book; the Tehillim.

Tehillim enables us to express to G-d whatever we feel. And there is no limit on how much Tehillim one can say. On the contrary, the more Tehillim you say the better. The Tehillim prayers are ready for use whenever a Jew feels the desire to pray.

## **In Your Spare Time**

A story is told of an old Jew who owned a small store. This store was always full of customers. When the old man died his son renovated, expanded and reopened the now big department store. However, for him business wasn't nearly as good as it had been for his old father. Dejected, he asked his Rebbe for advice.

The Rebbe asked him, "What do you do when you are not helping customers?" "I read the newspaper," the young man responded.

"And what would your father do when he wasn't helping customers?" the Rebbe asked.

"Why, he would recite Tehillim," the young man said.

"This is the source of your problem," the Rebbe explained. "Your father spent his time praying and the Yetzer Hora couldn't stand it, so he kept sending him customers to disturb him. You, on the other hand, read the newspaper so the Yetzer Hora has no reason to disturb you."

So, how do we integrate this important book into our daily schedules?

The Baal Shem Tov instituted a custom that every Jew should say the chapter of

Tehillim that corresponds to his year of life. A 30-year-old would say chapter 31, equal to the year of life he is presently living. I suggest that, in addition to our own chapter there's a nice way of praying for your children and loved ones each day - figure out the chapter that corresponds to their age and recite it daily. Here you have an opportunity to offer them a spiritual kiss.