



Time to Pray

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The beginning of the school year always brings a lot of excitement. There are new teachers, new classes, new classmates and new challenges. There are also many things to look forward to, like the days off for the holidays and of course the annual Totally Kosher Rib Burn-Off (this coming Monday from noon till five).

Over the course of the summer I have the opportunity to evaluate the curriculum making adjustments and enhancements where needed. In doing this I find new ways to make the material exciting and relevant for the students and for myself.

In Eighth Grade I have a particular struggle. T'fillah (prayer) for many teenagers (and I've found, in many adults) is a very difficult concept. It's not that there is a lack of faith, but rather a lack of connection to the words of the prayers.

I find myself to be very lucky; I wake up each day with the excitement of putting on my Tallit and Tefillin and going to shul (synagogue). I find great joy in using the first hour of my day as a time of reflection, a time to better understand who I am and who I want to be.

Teenagers aren't always so enthusiastic.

This past week, I began to study pages 16 and 17 of Talmud Brachot with the 8th graders. On those pages we are introduced to a number of scholars and the personal prayers that they added to the end of the Amidah. During our discussions, the students and I have talked about our good and evil inclination, our values, our self growth and our goals.

We talked about the idea of prayer as thanksgiving, petition and praise. We came to the conclusion that though we might ask God for things, sometimes the answer is "No". We realized that not all of the answers will even be answered in a way that we understand and there are things that must remain hidden.

I challenged each of the students to write their own prayer, to search deep inside of themselves to determine what they truly want and need out of life. These prayers will be added to the back cover of their siddurim in order to give them daily inspiration (as well as aspiration).

In this week's Parsha, Nitzavim, we read "The hidden are for Hashem, whereas the revealed are for us and our children forever to deal with." (Deut. 29:28).

Some commentators say the word “hidden” refers to the sins of the people of Israel that were committed in the forty years of wandering the desert. I would like to look at it differently. I think it refers to the mysteries of life.

As we are in the month of Elul, fast approaching the “High Holidays”, we are preparing ourselves for an intimate conversation with God. We are trying to make ourselves “higher”. We use this time to apologize for things that we did, to forgive others for what they did, to ask God for a year of health, happiness and prosperity, and perhaps even to question God for the decisions that He made. Questions like – How could the Shoah happen? Why did my loved one die? Why did so many die in the earthquake in Haiti? Why did I lose my job?

We don’t always have answers to these questions; they remain hidden.

God however, is not hidden. We have the ability to see God everywhere and in everything. The part that is revealed to us is our growth – it is what we gain, on a personal level. How we model that growth is how we pass it down to our children.

T’fillah gives us the time, daily, to think, to feel, to connect. It trains us to look for God, to look for meaning. In effect, it gives us guidance as to how we should use our time.

How will you use your time during the coming year?

AS A FAMILY:

Spend time praying together as a family. Remember that prayer can take on many shapes and forms. Which works best for your family?

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK’S PARSHA, NITZAVIM/VAYELECH, TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. Who is bound by the covenant with God?
2. Who witnesses this covenant? Why are they chosen?
3. What will happen if we do not follow the covenant?
4. To whom does Moshe transfer leadership? What advice does Moshe give him?
5. What is the Heychal ceremony?