



Honoring the memory of Belda K. Lindenbaum z"l

The Reluctant Davener

By Eli Steier

I love Hashem. I mean I really, really love Him. For real. I am still learning more about who He is and how to best love Him better, and we are certainly past the honeymoon phase. I also hope to never be tested to see how much I *really* love Him. That being said, despite everything we have been through, life with Him has been so unbelievable that I would not trade our relationship for anything in the world. I can't believe I wrote this aloud, but it is true. At the risk of letting you in too far, I share this truth because I am heartbroken over the fact that many people, including many of our students, are alienated from Him. This often manifests itself in the reluctance many students have towards davening. The good news is that I know, with Hashem's help, our students can learn to experience great heights in prayer:

When a person learns to pray properly, he will be able to understand what the Chazon Ish (*Emunah Ubitochon* 1:9) had in mind when he wrote, "When a person merits becoming aware of the reality of the Almighty's existence, he will experience limitless joy. All the pleasures of the flesh immediately disappear. His soul is enveloped in sanctity and it is as if it has left the body and floats in the upper Heavens. When a person transcends to this level, an entirely new world is open to him. It is possible for a person to be momentarily like a celestial being in this world. All of the pleasures of this world are as nothing compared to the intense pleasure of a person cleaving to his Creator (Pliskin 101).

While "limitless joy" in prayer is a great gift, this is not the litmus test of success, as a person who cries every day to Hashem can also be just as close to Him or closer, nor is heightened emotion the goal. Prayer is a time-tested pathway to come closer to Hashem while becoming one's true and best self, which includes being able to experience all emotions independently and with Him. If this is the case, why aren't more students running to be the first to Shacharit?

My sense is that many students are at a loss for what to do in a tefilla space. They know what they are *supposed* to do; most are familiar with the service and can follow along, but it is often a performance, a routine that has to be done and in which they are not personally involved,

though their body and voices might be. Additionally, it is my sense that students generally experience a degree of pressure to conform to religious life, some more than others, but their social environment calls for it, which is pressure enough. Rav Feuer taught me that no one likes to be defined from the outside, and our students are no different. They do not want to be told they are bad for not living up to an external standard; instead, they need to discover who they are and what they believe for themselves. This is what makes tefilla teaching so particularly fraught because, by the time the students reach high school, they most likely have a lot of spiritual baggage to unpack.

It is a testament to the strength of our students' souls that they pray during Shacharit at all. I am often scared to talk to students about Hashem because I do not want students to feel pressure to do so as they have enough pressure in their lives. I am also concerned about being perceived as one of "those" adults who dictates to them what they should be. However, I risk it because far too many are alienated from the tefilla service.

It is 8:00 a.m., and I imagine the kids have not had much time to sleep after a full day of school and a full night of homework. While praying in the back of one minyan, I see two students talking and ask them why they think teachers tell them to not talk during davening. "Just like in a classroom, you do not want to disturb the class," one answers. The other seems to agree but does not say. I tell them, "While not distracting others is a good value, I hope the greater reason is that it is an opportunity to connect with Hashem. The reason I hope you do not talk is because I want you to experience the delight of G-d's presence."

Silence.

On a different day, I notice a group of students not davening. Some are silently sitting, some are talking, and at least one is scrolling through his phone. I approach the student scrolling on his phone, with whom I have had some interactions before. Knowing this is a very personal question, I preface it with plenty of opportunities not to answer: "Do you have a personal relationship with G-d?" He thinks seriously for a few moments and tells me that he does not.

Another day, I see a student talking during davening. I approach him, and, after exchanging names, I ask him if he knows that G-d loves him. He says he is not sure, what with all the suffering in the world. I tell him he raises a good question. I ask if he has ever asked G-d about it. He says he has not.

Despite these challenges, there is much cause for hope. There are students who do connect with davening and building on the many strengths we already have as a community, we can make tefilla the highlight of the day for more of our students. We can create a culture where students are excited to say brachos, offering heartfelt blessings to the One and to those who cross their paths. I am confident we can help build our students to the point where their love of Hashem is such a source of strength that it can help them overcome any obstacle. I have hope because I know it is even possible for a student who had little connection to formal davening to become a tefilla teacher. I speak of none other than myself (*gasp, big reveal*). I did not attend day school and was skeptical of prayer, yet from my limited experience trying and failing (with an emphasis on failing - that is how we grow, right?), I have observed growth in students and have even been blessed with a positive note like this: "Dear Mr. Steier, I loved praying with you. Tremendously. I miss it too. But each day we prayed together, you gave me the world. I appreciate that more than you know."

This note and my history reveal that, with the grace of Hashem, anyone committed to tefilla teaching can support the prayer lives of their students. I am confident that each tefilla teacher can bring an irreplaceable approach to the prayer lives of their students through their unique visions, and what follows is a summary of my current one. My approach can be summed up in the following: wherever students are is where they should be. Being non-judgmental and curious is critical, allowing students to have whatever feelings they have about prayer, G-d, Torah, Judaism, etc. I have found that many students are looking to talk about their feelings and just need a listening ear. Honesty is holy. Anything they share about their relationship with G-d or experiences with prayer, good or bad, is a great gift of trust given to the teacher. Students have deep, rich inner lives, and many have passionate beliefs and experiences. I aim to honor this by seeking to learn from

them without an agenda beyond wanting to understand and cautiously help. I cautiously write “help” because the help has to be very particular. It has to be the type of help the student is able to receive. I aim to let them know that the gift of their sharing is appreciated and they do not have to share anything.

Besides relying on Hashem’s grace and the gifted teachers who have taught me, the following principles regarding tefilla teaching are a result of muddling through and reflecting on my muddling. I am very much aware that I am still in process as a tefilla teacher, and my suggestions here are more ideas to possibly experiment with rather than anything authoritative.

The following are some assumptions and dispositions I have found helpful.

- I highly encourage the tefilla teacher to pray on behalf of their students that they develop a strong relationship with Hashem. Pray for guidance and pray to be used by Hashem to guide the students closer to Him. Let them know that Hashem loves them just as they are and that, even if they do not ever pray, this will not change Hashem’s infinite love for them.
- One learns best how to pray by praying.
- Students want to pray. If they are not praying, it is because there are blocks in the way.
- Students may struggle with relationships in general and lack emotional tools including trust, commitment, and giving without expectations. A relationship with Hashem can be a committed relationship, and students may need to be introduced to this.
- Pay attention to the energy in the room and help students become aware of it, teaching them how they play a critical role in creating a container for Hashem’s presence.
- Where students struggle, as well as where they already feel great joy, can be a gateway to G-d.
- Usually, it is the student that has the answer and just needs a teacher to help him or her discover it.
- Students have the choice whether to develop their relationship with Hashem, and this choice must be acknowledged and respected.

- Hashem is beyond language, and just because a student has trouble expressing himself in the language of prayer does not mean that the student lacks deep spiritual knowledge of the One.

What follows is a framework to support tefilla teachers in the form of a problem posed and suggested solution. While I am labeling this as a guide, as the tefilla teacher, you are the guide and I encourage you to follow your instincts. In my experience, the teacher-student relationship is invaluable, and the answers will come as you problem-solve together.

Guide for the Reluctant Davener

Problem: What is the most important thing a teacher can do to create a space for heartfelt tefilla?

Based on the above guiding assumptions and dispositions, the following are some steps a tefilla teacher can take to create a space of heartfelt tefilla.

Step 1

In order to guide students, a teacher must have a strong relationship with Hashem. Relationship with Hashem cuts to the core of who we are as people, and it does not have to be perfect. It is very common to have varying degrees of conflicting feelings about Hashem and this is all part of being in a relationship with Him. If when the tefilla teacher approaches Hashem, the teacher feels anything other than an unconditionally loving accepting presence, the teacher should make it a priority to work on that relationship, dedicating time each day to talk with Him. This process may be aided by a mentor, therapist, colleague, friend, or private soul-searching. The teacher must be clear and honest about where he or she is at in terms of relationship with G-d, the siddur, and Jewish practice and knowledge in these areas. Where have you come from spiritually? Where are you going? How does prayer get you there? Be able to articulate how you approach prayer and why, so that you can offer students a way to approach prayer.

Approach student issues in tefilla like a teacher approaching a student struggling with any other subject. Observe and assess. Is the student familiar with the siddur? Is the block emotional? Are they discouraged? Exploring the root of the issue can be the first step to helping them reconnect with G-d and prayer. Seek to understand before offering any suggestions too quickly. Students are coming into the prayer space at all different levels of knowledge and experience. Do not expect that students have any knowledge about prayer other than what you teach them, and at the same time do not assume that what you teach is all that they know. It is also safe to assume there are multiple students who are more developed spiritually in certain areas than you are. Recognize and explain to them how the attempt to connect is courageous.

Although I am outlining the following steps, due to the nature of growth, expect students to develop in a unique way. You may find a student who is very self-aware and yet too self-conscious to pray aloud, who may have no issue hashkafically (ideologically). The teacher must consistently be assessing student levels and adjusting as needed.

I encourage creating a system in which you can check in with students about their relationship with Hashem and their spiritual growth in prayer. I have found it helpful to periodically check in with students by anonymous Google forms as well as by scheduling individual meetings on a regular basis. The questions should be geared towards specific areas you want to help them improve on. For example, you can ask: "How aware are you of what you are feeling and thinking during davening compared to the beginning of the year? How meaningful has praying your personal prayers been, and are there any challenges that you are finding with personal prayer?" It is best to tread lightly here, and if you detect a student does not want to talk about anything (whether through verbal or nonverbal cues), do not ask or pressure in any way.

Step 2

In order to pray most successfully, students will benefit from becoming aware of their thoughts, words, and actions: in short, becoming aware of themselves. Self-awareness is a lifetime endeavor and prayer can be a great tool in that process, as genuine prayer requires the

engagement of one's current awareness. The ability to look within to assess what one is experiencing is important for prayer because in order to be engaged with Hashem, one has to be aware of the self that is to be engaged with Him. What am I feeling right now? What are the thoughts I am thinking? Am I aware of what is triggering this reaction in me? Being able to identify what one is feeling and thinking without being possessed by it and without repressing it is a skill that takes sensitivity, courage, and practice. The greater this awareness, the more skillfully a student can interact with another, whether this other is Hashem or another person. One way to encourage this sort of reflection is by asking students at the beginning of davening how they are feeling on a sliding scale from 1-10, 1 feeling the worst and 10 feeling the best. Students can simply hold up their fingers to indicate their current state and use that as a basis for self-reflection.

Additionally, depending on the structure of the minyan, students can be paired with a spiritual chavruta, a concept I first learned from Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels. A spiritual chavruta is a partner in spiritual growth, and can be used in all sorts of ways. In this case, the goal of the spiritual chavruta would be to help his or her partner develop current self-awareness, answering a question such as: Is there anything on your mind or heart that you would want to share so that you can feel better prepared for prayer? They can each be given a minute to share, within their own zone of comfort, what they wish as their chavruta actively listens without speaking. The students should not share more than they are comfortable with, and it is fine for students to just talk generally or not talk at all during that minute, just to collect themselves. Giving students spaces like this, to just be with an accepting presence, gives them the opportunity for their true selves, their neshamot, to emerge. Before davening, the teacher can signal for the *tzibur* (community) to do their best to bring their awareness to Hashem now. As Rabbi Singer wrote, students need to daven to Him and not just say the words to the air, just as when a person speaks with another, the person is first aware of the other's presence before saying anything.

Another tool to build confidence in prayer is to provide time for students to pray personal prayers without the siddur before or after formal davening. Many students may not be comfortable with personally praying to Hashem and may feel silly doing so, especially in a social context. The

teacher can provide support that increases student comfort in this area with the goal of moving students to individual and then communal praying. I encourage the teacher to experiment to find what works best for his or her students, and some examples of each are provided below.

One individual activity is *hitbodedut*, personal praying to G-d popularized by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. The teacher can model aloud a short dialogue with Hashem at a low level of emotional risk. The teacher can then have students try, and if possible, have students go to different parts of the room to reduce the chance of another student overhearing their prayer. To encourage comfort with davening communally, a practice I learned from Mrs. Ruth Kagan might be helpful. The teacher can go around the room and have each student offer a specific, original praise or gratitude to Hashem. After each person offers their personal praise or gratitude, the *tzibur* says together “Hallelukah”. Self-awareness and davening aloud individually and communally are all skills that are worth developing.

Depending on your students, they may need more time doing these activities to get comfortable davening. I would not expect too much too soon and suggest trying out the same activities for a week before trying something else. Depending on what you observe in your minyan, you may want to craft other activities or keep using the same ones if students are connecting to them. Rabbi Drelich had an excellent suggestion for the teacher to daven his or her tefilla before they come to the minyan, as this allows the teacher to be more effective at assessing the students instead of focusing solely on their own tefilla.

Step 3

As students get more and more comfortable with praying aloud and aware of themselves, you can introduce the concept of the prayer service as an opportunity to bring their awareness for a ride: a ride to connect with Hashem, with their true selves, and to gain insight into life. The introduction of the Koren *Ani Tefilla* siddur has a graphic created by Rabbi Moshe Drelich which can be used to explain the concept. It is important to prepare students that what the journey will

look like today will be unique to them. Let them know how infinitely precious their attempts to pray are, as the very act of their attempt reveals more of G-d's presence in the world.

It is possible to have prayer experiences that are so blissful and so enlightening that words fail; it is possible to have prayer experiences that are the opposite. More often than not, students can have ups and downs and all types of feelings and thoughts throughout the experience. Part of the fun is the surprising aspect of it – we do not know what Hashem will reveal in prayer, but we can trust it will be for the good even when it seems bitter. I suggest that students stay on the lookout for insights, without making the demand that a successful prayer *must* yield insights into themselves, or their life, or Hashem, etc. In short, they can try to approach each tefilla for what it is: a new moment that has never occurred before. They are not the person they were a moment ago, and they should not expect their experience with Hashem in prayer will stay the same. Students should be encouraged to come with an open heart and see what is there. Another helpful frame is to invite students to consider that they are living souls on a journey through life and that, as living souls, they are actually pieces of Hashem sent into this world on a mission. While all of life is an opportunity to get in touch with this, prayer is a particular way that allows them to get in touch with the Infinite, and become greater and therefore even more effective in their mission.

I also invite students to not blindly believe anything I say, or take my word for anything, but just to see if they find it helpful. They are welcome to make it their own or discard it as they see fit, as long as they stay on the halachic road. Let them know that this is not the only way to approach prayer, but this is one way you are offering. I would caution you about expecting too much from students too soon. Many of your students might not be used to even the idea that the prayer space *needs* them and *cares* about their relationship with Hashem. While you do want to encourage their spiritual creativity, your goal is to offer tools by which you and your students can take your individual journeys together on the halachic road toward Hashem.

Step 4

Model for students the process of becoming aware of their emotional reactions to words of the tefilla. For five or ten minutes before davening, you can choose a tefilla and invite students to put their heart on the words of prayer. You can start with *Baruch She'amar*: "Are there any words that evoke an emotional reaction, positive or negative?" Depending on the level of the students, you can ask them to explore why that might be, or to try and find the belief or memories that evoke the charge. I would tread lightly here as well. The goal in this exercise is just to help students become aware of their emotional reactions to tefilla. Both the consonance and dissonance are rich places in which to connect to Hashem.

Step 5

Students may not be aware of how each section of the tefilla can be utilized, so I would encourage students to focus on one or two areas of the tefilla to have specific *kavanah* (*intention*). The teacher can provide specific kavanot for each minyan depending on the goals of the teacher. Some ideas are:

Before Ahavah Rabbah

"*Ahavah Rabbah*, with an eternal love you have loved us. Before we say this prayer, I invite you to bring to mind all the people that have loved you in your life. This does not mean they had to be perfect. It can be anyone who made you feel loved in some way: parents, family, friends. You can even include strangers who you may have shared a smile with when you bought something somewhere, or the people who put up traffic lights to make sure roads are safer for you. As you are bringing this crowd to mind, I invite you to consider one particular person who you feel particularly loved in the presence of, and have them come from the crowd while the rest is showering you with feelings of love. For those who feel called to, when you say the first two words of this prayer, try to send love to Hashem who sent these people your way, and who is loving you just as you are right now (based on a meditation by Rabbi James Jacobson Maisels)."

Before the Shema

“What does it mean that Hashem is One? I often experience the world in a separate way: there is you, which is distinct from me, and there is the floor, and the ceiling, and the siddur. These are all separate things and, while this is true, what if Hashem’s Oneness means that all of these separate things are actually connected together at their root in Hashem, that while separate we are actually one with Him at the same time? If this resonates with you, as you say the *Shema* today, say it with a yearning to experience the completeness of being one with Him (I first heard this idea from Rabbi Ingber, and it is also mentioned in *The Secret Life of God* by Rabbi David Aaron as well as by Rabbi Zev Bannett).”

Before the Amidah

“Before we daven the *Amidah* today, with the kindest of eyes, I invite you to take five seconds to take a good look at the people in the room today. Is there anything you feel they need? When you daven the *Amidah*, consider expanding your prayers to pray for anyone, in this room or beyond, who may have the same lacks you noticed.”

“Life is amazing! While there are definitely challenges, there are so many good things going on! There are sunrises, sunsets, ice cream, children, schools, Torah, pigeons, etc. [You can invite students to name one thing that they are grateful for and go around the room getting a few more] Before the closing bracha of *Modim*, I invite you to insert a short personal prayer thanking Hashem for five things that are good in your life.”

Before Aleinu

“In the *Aleinu* prayer, we yearn for a time when Hashem’s unity is recognized by the whole world. What would a world look like in which there is more of His presence? How would your life and the lives of others you see regularly be different? After the last line of *Aleinu*, take a moment to imagine being there and see if you can take one small step today to make that world more of a reality.”

Step 6

Create routines early on that help students take ownership of the space and the service.

The following suggestions are by no means exhaustive, and I encourage you to think of other ones.

- Have the students set up and put away the chairs, siddurim, and mechitza. This may seem like a small thing, but it makes clear that this space is theirs and it is their work that contributes to a davening environment.
- Create an open space for personal prayer at the beginning or at the end of davening. For example, before davening you can ask anyone if they have a prayer for the group or for someone in their life, or something on their heart they wish to offer to Hashem. The teacher can model this process.
- Model and create a rotation where students craft *kavanot* for different tefillot. They can introduce the kavanot at specific times in the service that are set beforehand.
- Create time after prayer for students to share what they experienced in tefilla. This can be done as a group or by breaking students into pairs or groups in which students take a minute each to share and then listen to their partner(s) share about the tefilla experience.
- Talk to the students about what will make them feel the prayer space is theirs. For some that might mean being able to sit on the floor or move their chair somewhere else in the room. For others it might mean having a window open, or being away from the wall. For some it might mean being able to stretch or do jumping jacks before davening or listening to music. Space permitting, if students could bring in a pillow or something that is theirs that will help them own the space, that would be great. If you find out students like a certain song, the prayer leader can incorporate the tune in *Psukei d'zimrah*.

- State explicitly that all feelings are welcome in the davening space; one can be happy or sad, laughing or crying, as long as it is *l'shem shamayim*, meaning it is a natural, spontaneous result of an honest attempt to connect to the Holy One. They also should not worry about how loud or soft their voices are or adopting the prayer leader's tone. They should be encouraged to be themselves.
- Allow students to sit where and how they like as long as it does not violate halacha.
- Prayer is a deeply vulnerable act, and a safe space can be created by having clear expectations and making it okay to have struggles in prayer. For example, you can tell students where you still struggle in prayer or where you used to struggle in a particular area. Students may benefit from knowing that you continue to work on your own prayer practices.

Problem: What do I do if a student says that he does not have a relationship with Hashem?

Students are already in relationship with Hashem, even if it is a relationship of alienation. One of the things I have asked students to do to orient them towards a model of building a healthy relationship with Hashem is to put a name to their relationship with G-d. Is G-d a stranger, a friend, a frenemy? This gives them an orienting place from which to grow.

Problem: How do I help a student grow a relationship with Hashem when he feels that Hashem is an enemy or a tyrant out to get him?

It is common for students who struggle in prayer to view Hashem as the "Old Man In The Sky". The dynamic of the relationship is one of the powerful against the powerless, and He is often experienced as judgmental and angry. The student feels they have to appease this G-d in order to get what they want. They feel that if they ask G-d for what they want in prayer, He may become very happy and generous and will give it to them; however, if He does not, it means they are bad. They may see the Amidah as a magic incantation to get what they want.

Try to find out why they do not see Hashem as a supportive force..Consider asking the student the following: Why do you feel Hashem is an enemy? Have you always felt this way? Was there a time Hashem disappointed you by not doing something for you? Was there a time that Hashem really pulled through for you? Who ultimately gave you the things you enjoy in your life? This might be a situation in which a mental health professional needs to be called in for support.

Problem: My students don't understand why prayer is meaningful. What are some models of prayer I can offer them?

The following are some alternative ways to approach prayer. I highly recommend Rabbi Aryeh Ben David's book *The Godfile* for further approaches.

- *Prayer as Discovery.* When one prays, one is speaking to G-d. As Rav Kook says, the soul is always praying. Prayer is not merely about asking for things, but is about becoming aware of the true self that I am, the neshamah. How do I know when the voice among the voices in my head is the voice of my neshamah? How do I know what "I" really think, or who "I" really am? Prayer is self-discovery, the awakening of the soul. Rav Barnett taught this well, and defined what growth is: the process of becoming aware of capacities I did not know I had. Instead of seeing prayer as only asking for "things", students can be encouraged to ask Hashem to reveal to them aspects of themselves they have questions about, to help them find who they are meant to be, and to reach part of their soul's infinite potential, even if they don't yet know what that may entail.
- *Prayer as Encounter.* tefilla is an opportunity to connect with Hashem. We cannot force a connection with Hashem the same way one cannot force a friendship; we can only show up and spend time together. It is important for students to understand that although Hashem is not changing, their feelings during prayer may

change from day to day, as we are always changing. One day they may feel more connected to Hashem, and the next feel more distance. Some days may feel exciting, some frightening, some boring, and all feelings should be accepted. The main goal is to continue to show up, and to recognize that any time invested is building their relationship with Hashem and is not wasted.

- *Prayer As Gift.* To love in its purest form is to give without any expectation of receiving anything back. Hashem has given us everything we have and ever will have. Since we are the receivers of such great bounty we can come to prayer and offer the words of tefilla with the sole intention of giving back to Hashem. For many, if not all of us, giving without the expectation of anything back is a muscle that needs constant development. The counterintuitive approach is very spiritual but may not “feel” like it. It actually may feel quite uncomfortable to give to G-d without expecting anything back. A person may struggle with even getting the words out. You can help them by setting goals for how much of the service they can dedicate to this practice and, if they are drawn to it, support them in setting reasonable goals over time.
- *The Verbal Journal: Hashem as Healer and/or Therapist.* As the Chofetz Chaim wrote in *Shemirat HaLashon*, Hashem loves each person more than the person loves themselves. Hashem loves us eternally and infinitely; unfortunately, it appears common that students do not feel this. The degree that someone feels Hashem’s all-accepting love is often limited by the degree to which they accept and love themselves. One way to guide students in this is to let them know that Hashem loves them unconditionally, and that it is understandable if they do not feel that. There are sometimes barriers between us and Hashem and these barriers are not a sign of Hashem not loving us, but are guide posts directing us to come closer to Him. Even if the student feels that Hashem does not listen to them or is hostile to

them, you can assure them that this is a barrier or a projection that is worth talking about with Hashem. If the student accepts this, he or she will be able to have a close confidante in Hashem who the student can talk through their issues with. This type of prayer is like verbal journaling which can be carried anywhere.

- A note of caution here, particularly with students who are struggling with mental health issues. Some students may not be ready to deal with the idea that they are projecting onto Hashem, and even explaining this concept may be more than some can handle. Additionally, this topic may not be one a tefilla teacher feels comfortable with nor the student may be comfortable hearing. It depends on the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the student. The student may already have and may need the support of a mental health professional. I would use your judgment and tread cautiously.

Problem: My student does not connect to Hashem and therefore does not pray. What should I do?

Have a one-on-one meeting where you honor the honesty and courage of the student for sharing such information. Offer the different models of how to approach prayer, and ask the student to commit to trying one out. If the student does not want to try any of them, work with the student to craft an approach that will work for the student. Oftentimes when a student says they do not connect with Hashem or believe in Hashem, there is a huge amount of baggage present that needs to be approached delicately. The student may mean various things by these statements, and I would caution coming to any definitive conclusions. Serving as a sounding board to identify what the specific block is will help guide you and the student to the solution. One's relationship with G-d is a very intimate relationship, and relationships with G-d are often strongly tied up with relationships with parents and, as Betty Steinman has repeatedly taught me, oneself. If a student has a troubled relationship with a parent, it is possible that the student projects this onto G-d and

then rejects this projection. Even students with positive relationships with their parents may have baggage around G-d from past experiences.

- It is understandable when a person has a hard time relating to Hashem. There is no one like Him! As a stepping stone, the Piaseczna Rebbe in his book *Bnei Machshavah Tovah* relates the idea of using images to help connect to Hashem. For example, a student can use an image of a person they feel safe and close with, and bring that image to mind when praying. This can be used as an initial tool, if the student cannot connect to Hashem without it.

Problem: My students say they connect with Hashem in other ways and not through prayer as a reason to not pray.

First, I would celebrate your student's ability to connect with Hashem through other activities. Students do connect to Hashem in all sorts of ways, and I think the aim of life is to be connected to Him in all activities. Sometimes students might find other activities more pleasurable than prayer, so I would push them to define connection and see if you can tell if it is an escape. When someone is scrolling through their feed on Instagram, it would not be untrue to say they are connecting on Instagram, The quality of the connection, to me, is most likely what I call an escape, where the mind is fully absorbed in the task in a way that the self is not engaged, but rather subsumed, not enlarged or expanded, but absorbed into the experience. It might be beneficial to probe further about this in a one-on-one meeting. Some may want to avoid the effort, vulnerability, and energy prayer requires. It is important for students to understand that nothing can take the place of speaking one-on-one with their Creator. As stated above, the most important thing is for students to show up consistently and with time, Hashem willing, the connection will come.

Problem: My students do not resonate with the words like Father or King when referring to Hashem. Is there anything I can do?

You can ask them: What do they associate with the terms father or king? This may lead to a fruitful discussion unpacking the baggage behind those terms. Alternatively, you can suggest the idea of the king having to do with the highest just authority that is in their service. Rabbi Sokoloff explained to me that the difference between a typical earthly king and Torah ideal of kingship is that in the Torah the king seeks the welfare of the people, not to dominate the people. Hashem has no ego problems. You can ask the student if he ever felt that something should be fair that was not. As I am sure he has, I suggest that this can be seen as a desire for G-d's kingship to be revealed, and that ultimately it will be one day.

Problem: My students value honesty and do not want to say things they do not mean. In short, they do not want to be dishonest with Hashem. For example, a student feels uncomfortable praying in plural or saying Ashrey when they do not feel the things they are saying. Any suggestions?

This is such a holy impulse! Please affirm for your students that this is an excellent quality and that a relationship with Hashem requires this type of honesty. You can offer the idea that the tefillos we have are gifts from spiritual giants, who left authentic records of their experiences. The prayers can then be viewed as ladders from which to climb and that by saying them, even when you do not fully mean them, is like doing laps that challenge one's soul's distance running. You are aspiring for greatness and there is nothing fake about that. Hashem willing, as you keep saying the prayers and grow, new meanings may be discovered.

For the plural issue, you can tell them that the student can include the teacher in the davening, so that his I plus mine becomes a we, making it honest. You can also teach that ultimately we are all part of Him and when we pray as a we are acknowledging this spiritual interconnectedness.

Problem: A student feels disconnected from the Amidah, that he is having to say other people's prayers and not his own. How do I help him see the value of praying the words?

Rabbi James Jacobson Maisels suggests that prayer is an opportunity to cultivate positive character traits. By intending to say the words of the Amidah, one attempts to grow the dispositions of gratitude, justice, forgiveness, peace, knowledge, etc. Invite the student to consider that the words they say are seeds they are planting. They will have to want to cultivate those traits because it will not work unless it is their intention.

The *Shulchan Aruch in Orach Chaim 119:1* mentions that one may insert prayers that are connected to a bracha in the middle of the bracha. This is an opportunity for students to use the Amidah as a way to structure their own personal davening as opposed to just saying everyone's words. They may have many things to pray about and using the Amidah as a structure to organize their tefilla may be helpful.

- Have students select a passage from the *Amidah* they feel most troubled by, and see if you can identify the specific blocks and come up with creative solutions. Personally for me, the section about informers is the hardest. I would model for students how I deal with this paragraph. For myself, I focus on the wickedness perish in an instant and add a personal prayer about turning them into friends before the closing bracha.

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Thank you for taking the time to read through this guide and for your efforts in supporting students coming closer to Hashem. I am eager to learn from you, so please feel free to reach out to me at esteier@sarhighschool.org to share or if you want to connect about tefilla. May the Holy One Blessed Be He bless you with joy and success as you work to reunite Him with His children.

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