

## Teaching *Tefilla*

-by Rabbi Adin Steinzalz

Rabbi Adin Steinzalz is a very well-known teacher and writer who lives in Israel. He is best known for the "Steinzalz Talmud" -- translations of the Talmud from Aramaic into modern Hebrew and into English, that make the Talmud accessible to many more people. His English translation is being published by Random House. (See the article from Time Magazine, 3 pages ahead. )

This is a shortened and translated version of a Hebrew article by R. Steinzalz. The complete text of the Hebrew article is in this book, right after this translation. In this article, he talks about the problems of teaching *tefilla*, and also makes some important points about the essence of *tefilla*.

Any question about 'Teaching *Tefilla*' , such as 'Is it possible to teach *tefilla*?' and 'What can you do to teach *tefilla*?' depends on a much more basic question: What is the essence of *tefilla*?

Why is this such a basic question? Well, anyone who teaches *tefilla* and goes beyond simply giving over information related to *tefilla*, winds up bumping into the question: What exactly is *tefilla*?

Generally, there are two areas in which schools and parents who try to teach *tefilla* concentrate. On the one hand, they habituate children to pray three times a day in an almost mechanical fashion, and get students in the habit of praying, and on the other hand, they try to teach what the words in the Siddur mean. This has a great deal of importance and value -- but it is not 'Teaching *Tefilla*' in its essential form.

I would like to give a personal illustration of this.

After several years, I met an old friend who is now the head of an academy of Jewish learning in Israel, and I asked him to what he pays attention during *tefilla*. So he explained that he tries to understand the connection between each word and each sentence in the Siddur. He investigates and thinks about this and calls this 'Attention to *tefilla*'. Very briefly, I said to him that these are things that I do on Shabbat afternoon, when I have leisure time, and that sometimes I look in books that explain *tefilla*, etc... But to say that 'Attention to *tefilla*' is when a person engages in the analysis of a text [even the text of a Siddur] -- to this I cannot agree.

To explain, let me cite a popular anecdote. A very simple Jew, almost an ignoramus, stands on Rosh HaShana and recites with great fervor the words of the Machzor:

וְיָבִיאוּ לָנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ - מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הַשְּׁמַיִם וְיִשְׁמְרוּנוּ וְיִשְׁמְרוּנוּ

Now, these words are part of a rather complicated, intricately-arranged prayer, and so he was asked, 'What do you have to do with all this? Why are you so fervent about this prayer?' He answered: 'What do I care what it says

there? I know that all the prayers mean the same thing: God Almighty, provide me with food, allow me to make a living!!'

In my opinion, the Jew in the story is certainly closer to the deeper meaning and essence of *tefilla* than someone who knows exactly when the prayers were composed, and who knows all sorts of grammatical details about the words of the prayers.

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In order to arrive at what I call 'standing in prayer', I think that one needs to deal first of all with two 'technical' problems regarding *tefilla*. These very first problems are not what words to say and how to understand these words. The two 'technical' problems of which I speak come a long way before the questions of what words to say and how to understand them. Here they are: When a person prays, s/he first of all says ' *אני עומד לפניך* '. And when a person says ' *אני עומד לפניך* ', s/he stands facing God, confronting God. In other words, when a person prays, s/he places him/herself facing God, and this is beyond any problem with the text of prayer. In every *tefilla*, before all else, one places oneself facing this huge subject. When a person prays, s/he is speaking to God.

I had to face this question as a father, not as a teacher. My little daughter wanted to talk to me one day when I was in the middle of *tefilla*, and I didn't answer her. She was angry and complained: 'Why won't you talk to me?' I answered her (as I think one really should answer): 'I was busy; I was talking to God'. And then she came back and pointed out, wisely, that she doesn't see God answering me.

This second question is a very deep one, which goes beyond this discussion right now. But in any case, a child of five was ready to accept the idea that I was talking to God, but she wanted it to be a dialogue, a conversation, not just me talking.

The point is that every *tefilla's* essence lies in one basic point, and that point is in the words *אני עומד לפניך*, and more specifically in the word *אני*. In other words, if I feel the "You" before me, if there is Someone there (i.e. God) to talk to, then I can pray, and if there is no one there to talk to, then what is the point of all the reciting and speaking, of all the prayer-texts in the world, whether they are ancient or modern? What is the value of all this if I do not have a feeling of God's presence, in the simplest possible way?

The point that I'm making is really very simple, but yet needs to be emphasized: *tefilla* is an expression of belief. It is impossible to pray, without believing that "I" am standing facing "You", that there is a "You" standing

facing me. I don't want to get into the complex aspects of this point -- this is a simple point, that a child of five can understand. And still, this is a problem that faces adults when they talk about 'attention to tefilla' and about 'Teaching tefilla.'

So when I pray, I'm talking to Someone. I have to believe in His existence --- not only in the existence of "Someone" stuck in a corner who can't touch me or come near me, and with whom I'll make sure not to have any contact -- but in the existence of 'Someone' who is there, facing me, and that this 'Someone' listens to the things that I say to Him. I have to believe, in other words, that God not only exists, but that He's right there.

The first very basic problem in teaching tefilla is the idea that 'Teaching tefilla' must arouse the awareness of God within the pray-er (i.e. the one who prays). This is the more general problem. Then, there is a second problem: most parts of tefilla are prayers of request. So when I pray, I am asking for something. And the request includes the expectation of a miracle, the assumption that a miracle can indeed happen. I ask that some change, either large or small, happen in the world. The essence of this is the request that something happen, something that would not have happened if I had not prayed. This is a very simple way of putting it, but there is no other way to understand any blessing or prayer.

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Before talking about the various side-points of tefilla, such as what words to say, one has to remember that tefilla isn't just an act, just something that you say. So therefore teaching tefilla is not just teaching a certain behaviour. Teaching tefilla is part of something much larger: part of teaching a struggle for belief.

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To help you understand this article:

The ideas in this article are difficult, as you probably noticed. It is, however, very important, that you understand this article. Therefore:

1. Read this article over two or three times.
2. Answer the following two questions, in writing, or in your head:
  - a. What are the two 'technical' problems that one needs to deal with in order to do real tefilla, according to R. Steinzalz?
  - b. Which one word in the article best summarizes what R. Steinzalz thinks tefilla is?