

Prayer:

Today I went to synagogue and prayed, but not to a higher power from whom I expect something. I do this every week, religiously, and believe I will continue to do so in the future. If prayer were simply a communication between me and a deity then this religious act of mine makes no sense.

Prayer is indeed communication, but in my case, not between myself and God. The word communication in English is related etymologically to the word community, when I pray, I do so in a community context, together with other people who share many of my values and aspirations. When I sing with my community our voices rise in harmony (OK that really depends on who is singing) we announce to ourselves and to the world, our communal hopes for a better world, for the healing of the sick, and for protection from evil intentions. The common denominator uniting much of our prayer, is that much of what we speak of, is beyond our power as individuals, and that it can only be accomplished through a concerted communal effort. By praying we validate those communal aspirations and give ourselves strength to continue.

Join a choir, you may retort, at least when you sing in a choir you don't have to say words you don't mean to imaginary beings couched in patriarchal language and dripping with antiquated values. Let me offer a rebuttal, my friend. When I pray, I try very hard to use only words that I mean, I am an ardent advocate of liturgical innovation and have been writing poetry and prayer for almost a decade.

My prayer is not directed to an imaginary being, it is not couched in patriarchal language and is not dripping with antiquated values. It does, however, use Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew and is structured in the same way my foremothers and fathers have prayed for generations. This is what makes it Jewish prayer, the structure and the language; the content changes because we as a people change. If I came from a Christian or Muslim background the sentiments and values I expressed would be the same, but the language and structure would reflect a Muslim or Christian upbringing. Innovative heartfelt prayer is at the dynamic heart of some of the most vibrant Christian communities in the West (Jews generally speaking are much more canonical in this respect and prefer set words). Despite being agnostic, I truly believe that prayer is one of religion's gifts to humanity.

But what about my brethren who pray from a set liturgy every day, and do speak to an imaginary being, is this so awful? Asking an imaginary being for something that is beyond your power as an individual to influence is equivalent to expressing a hope, it provides one with a communal psychological outlet and unless we're hoping and praying for something negative like please God let all atheists be hit with the plague (even this is not so awful unless one actively participates in manufacturing the plague), then there really is nothing inherently negative about it. What about the patriarchal hierarchal language and antiquated value system used in so much of monotheistic liturgy, which in highly gendered languages such as Hebrew is very apparent. Personally, I regard it as offensive, but so many of my friends employ this language, yet are highly egalitarian people, who fight to undo negative hierarchies. My spouse is one of these people and as a matter of course, I've had many conversations with her regarding her prayer habits. The words function for her kind of like a meditational mantra, and help her concentrate on the issues she wants to deal with in her prayer. It's not that the words don't speak to her at all, if certain words relate to issues she wishes to deal with she concentrates on those words, but the words are only a stepping stone for her. In the same way some people learn martial arts not in order to kill which was its original purpose but in order to learn focus and discipline, to learn the perfection of movement and the maximization of power.

What about the religious "right" ? they pray to an imaginary deity for things you and I would find offensive, and often they mean what they say, sometimes it's no stepping stone to better things, sometimes they pray to crush people under their feet, and they really wish to crush their enemies under their feet. Sometimes they thank God for not making them a woman and they are really thankful for not being a woman. The only thing I can say regarding these people and their prayer is that I hope their wishes don't come true. Prayer is not inherently good or evil, it is simply a mode of expression, and human beings can use it as a conduit for whatever they wish. I pray according to a structure and in a language dictated by my tradition, I pray for peace, the end of poverty, the end of hunger, the end of gender hierarchy, I pray that you pray for good.