



WITH ALL MY HEART

*A new, six-session course on the Jewish art
of prayer and spiritual experience*

Deliberately or spontaneously, robotically or fervently, vocally or mentally, it is undeniable that humans are hardwired to pray. Perhaps a glad heart soaring on wings of gratitude or a reflexive response to tragedy or personal crisis; longing for a brighter future or solace to a lonely soul; an atheist in a foxhole or a card-carrying worshipper traveling a well-oiled highway of religiosity to the Creator's throne room; amid joy at a wedding, tears at a funeral, or the ancient blast of a ram's horn on Rosh Hashanah: for endless reasons, humans pray.

It is equally indisputable that many find the concept of prayer, particularly formal prayer, distant and mysterious. In our era of high-tech self-absorption, prayer services are often seen as bewildering or daunting. The assumed tool of prayer, the prayer book, is a closed book for the uninitiated, each page inspiring further bafflement. Some find prayer boring, others confusing, and yet others archaic or senseless.

The Rohr Jewish Learning Institute has set for itself the ambitious goal of tackling these challenges and restoring prayer, one of the Jewish nation's most precious and potent treasures, to its rightful place: the vibrant hearts and inspired minds of Jews worldwide. *With All My Heart* seeks to remove the barriers that prevent people from enjoying the gifts of meaningful, genuine, practical, and rewarding communication with their G-d whenever they need it most.

With All My Heart reaches out to every stratum of our nation and invites them to explore Jewish philosophical analyses and mystical insights that offer fresh and thoughtful perspectives on prayer. This six-part course provides multiple entry points for participants of every knowledge level and affiliation. It accepts the heaviest challenges leveled against the concept and standardization of prayer, and responds with wisdom that causes the art of prayer to become more accessible, personalized, and profound.

LESSON ONE**THE POINT AND PERSONALIZATION OF PRAYER**

We have degrees to earn, bills to pay, and diapers to change. Amid the rapids of life, many feel that prayer simply does not earn itself a time-slot. Others find speaking to an unseen being too ethereal for realistic consideration. Some have it all, and see no need for appeals to the heavens. Others need and believe, but are bored or turned-off by the liturgy, the congregational elements, or the ritualistic nuances of formal prayers; they simply do not find it meaningful.

This lesson explores the ultimate purpose of prayer, which is to foster a deep and meaningful connection with G-d, and it demonstrates the ways in which prayer facilitates this remarkable goal. Prayer emerges as beneficial for all people—spiritual seekers or otherwise, and those with or without particular requests. The lesson also provides tips on personalizing the liturgy for a deeper, more meaningful experience.

LESSON TWO**PRAYING FOR PRACTICAL RESULTS**

Prayer is commonly seen as synonymous with petitioning G-d for things we need or desire. This raises a storm of questions: If we believe that G-d determines precisely what we should have, is it not insolent or heretical to ask G-d for something different? And why should G-d pay attention to our appeals for alterations to the divine plan? Do we even have the power to influence that plan?

This lesson dives into the illuminating wisdom of Jewish mysticism to discover how prayer works. It delineates a complex process through which G-d interacts with the world and its inhabitants—including a method of overriding that system to influence its practical outcome. Key to this endeavor is praying with the appropriate approach and frame of mind, which are also explored in this lesson. In addition, we discover that the apparently self-serving act of praying for our needs is pivotal to fostering an intimate relationship with G-d.

LESSON THREE**A LADDER TO HEAVEN: THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE PRAYER BOOK**

Stereotypically, Jews lovingly open a prayer book and instantly sway into the heavens—words flowing, emotions soaring, faces radiant and relaxed. In reality, many stare in dismay at a confusing jumble of verses without detecting rhyme or reason to the structure of the prayers. Some do not bother to open it to begin with, preferring to be guided by their own hearts rather than one-size-fits-all printed texts.

This lesson explores the history, function, structure, and goals of the Jewish prayer book. Viewed as a critical tool in building a relationship with G-d, the prayer book must bow to the dynamics of any genuine relationship: It demands time and patience, and unavoidably, the process is gradual. It is structured as a ladder, leading from distant to close, from distracted to united, and from hard ground to the soft outpouring of the soul. The prayer book is designed as a step-by-step guide to real conversation and genuine bonding with G-d. This lesson discusses the first two steps of this process, and offers a fresh appreciation of the world around us.

LESSON FOUR**THE SHEMA: REACHING BEYOND CREATION**

There are moments when spontaneous wonder evokes a sense of connection with G-d. It may be the birth of a child, a splendid sunrise, a landscape, or the intricate marvels of G-d's world unveiled by modern science. All of these, however, are akin to grasping at G-d's hand that is present within the confines of our universe. But is G-d not greater than the universe? Is there not more to G-d than His voluntary service as the Creator? And if we assume that G-d is infinitely beyond Creation, can a miniscule mortal dare to claim a meaningful relationship with G-d?

This lesson transforms these questions into a springboard into the heart of the next stage of Jewish prayers, climbing beyond G-d-the-Creator to explore deeper aspects of G-d's Self. The tool for this heightened awareness is the celebrated Shema prayer and its preparatory liturgy. We ponder the concept of a G-d who utterly transcends the universe while paradoxically remaining intimately involved and accessible. The lesson's profound insights empower our relationship with G-d with new understanding and enthusiasm, inspiring us to venture beyond the confines of our own inner universes.

LESSON FIVE**THE AMIDAH: SYNTHESIZING DIVINITY
AND MATERIALITY**

It is widely assumed that we must choose between spirituality and self-refinement, and swimming further into a murky sea of materialism. If we choose the more ascetic option, then a brief examination of our prayer book is a cause for dismay; it contains bewildering dissonance: Prayer is supposed to foster spiritual refinement and a soulful bond with the Divine. But our prayers are replete with pleading for materialistic needs—money, health, success, and the like. The paradox seems inescapable.

This lesson examines the frontlines of the dissonance: the extensive Amidah prayer. The Amidah sits squarely at the pinnacle of the service, representing the peak of angelic holiness—the ultimate connection point with G-d. Its content, conversely, reads like a lists of material demands. The lesson compels us to reconsider all we knew or assumed about the relationship between spirituality, G-d, and our tangible needs. This seeming contradiction gives way to a brilliant appreciation of prayer, G-d, and our purpose on planet Earth.

LESSON SIX**IT TAKES A VILLAGE: THE DYNAMICS
OF COMMUNAL PRAYER**

It may be thrice daily or twice annually. Often, depending on how frequently a Jewish individual prays, so are the number of visits to a synagogue. Judaism's prioritization of communal prayer is perplexing: If prayer is to provide individual hearts and souls with a voice to communicate personally to G-d, to facilitate contemplation and reflection, to enhance the ability to sense G-d's presence in our personal lives, and to advance a relationship with the Divine, then private settings seem more appropriate than clustered halls.

This lesson scrutinizes the function of communal prayer, identifying critical elements missing from praying solo, thus making group praying indispensable to achieving our ultimate goals in prayer. It also examines practical approaches for balancing the profoundly personal aspects of prayer with the critical communal elements, allowing a worshipper the best of both approaches.