

An excerpt from

Talking to God

by Rabbi Naomi Levy

(We have added emphasis and changed the order of two paragraphs.)

I like to sit in houses of worship long after the worshipers have gone. All alone in the dark, way up in the balcony or in the last seat of a cavernous hall, I sometimes find myself imagining words that have passed from the congregants' whispering lips to God's ear. Prayers seem to hover in the air like the smell of a fire long after the flames have died out. These prayers are not the ones that come from books. They are less literate, without rhyme or meter, without fancy embellishment. The ones not printed in black and white, but in all the subtlety and mystery of the human soul. They are prayers of life and death, joy and mourning, longing and thanksgiving. Prayers shouted in anger or sung out in love. They are daily prayers, once-in-a-lifetime prayers. Prayers of women and men, of the healthy and the ailing, of the young and the elderly, of the rich and the poor.

Canonized (that is, official "prayers that are accepted by the community") prayers contain ancient and eternal wisdom and are central to religious experience. They are dependable and beautifully written. Often set to sublime music, they link us to our community when we recite them together, and to our history when we remember that these very words were uttered centuries ago. They connect us to future generations as well, for they will continue to inspire for centuries to come. No matter what our religious tradition, established prayers are the framework of our faith. We teach them to our children and turn to them again and again throughout the measure of our days. ***They instruct us in the articles of our belief***, in our unique bond with God, and in the particular expressions of that relationship.

But what are we to do when the prayer book does not contain the words we are searching for? What do we do when certain feelings well up inside us, but the words to express them are absent from our liturgies?

...People of all faiths have complained to me that many of their traditional prayers do not always move them. They say the flowery language and the formality of the prayers are an obstacle to their spiritual expression. I have often felt the same way too. Certain prayers leave me feeling empty.

Some people are shocked when I encourage them to supplement their traditional prayers with personal, spontaneous ones. They ***assume that making any change to the prayer service is forbidden. But they are mistaken.*** Composing personal prayers is not a sin, it's a blessing. It is a way to restore our communication with God. Where do you think all the prayers in the prayer book came from? ***They weren't written in heaven.*** They were created by human beings who were filled with awe and who wanted

to share their thoughts and feelings with God. Religious expression is not some relic from the past. We should never hesitate to give voice to our souls... In fact, as you will learn, people were, originally expected to make up their own versions of the prayers, and the prayer leader would repeat the accepted communal version as a model of what you might want to think about.

But talking to God doesn't always come easily. Talking to God implies that there is a Being who cares and understands, and, even more than that, one who helps and heals. There are times when we need and want to talk, but we fear that God isn't listening. Sometimes we are too angry with God to begin a conversation. Sometimes we do talk, wait for a reply, but receive no answer. So we walk away feeling hurt and abandoned. There is nothing more humiliating than pouring out your soul to someone who isn't paying attention. What's the point of that, we ask ourselves....

"Pray for me, Rabbi" is probably the most common request I hear from those who come to see me. My response is always, "Of course I will, but I need your help:" And I encourage the person seated before me to tell me what he or she wants me to say to God. Inevitably, the most heartfelt and beautiful words of prayer issue forth from the very mouth that had previously been unable to pray. Stunned and proud, the individual returns to the world blessed with the gift of personal prayer.

It is remarkable to see what can emerge from us when we stop trying to pray to God and start talking to God instead. Too often we envision prayer as something saintly and proper. Something that has strict rules and standards. We get intimidated and inhibited. But talking to God is a very natural and intimate experience. We can talk to God anywhere: in the shower, in the car, at work, in bed. We don't need to sound smart or polished. We don't need to ask anyone else to do it for us.