



**A Realistic Relationship
To Prayer**

Mervyn Medicks

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want*
He layeth me down in green pastures
He leadeth me beside the still waters
My soul rejoiceth
He leadeth me in the path of righteousness for His sake
Yea, though I walk through a valley of death
I shall fear no evil – for Thou art with me
Thy rod and Thy staff shall comfort me**
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies
Thou anointest my head with oil
My cup runneth over ***
Surely God's goodness and mercy
Shall follow me all the days of my life
And I shall dwell in the house of The Lord for ever

מזמור לדיד:
יהוה רועי לא אחסר
בנאות דשא ירביצני
על מי מנוחות ינהלני
נפשי ישובב
ינחני במעגלי צדק למען שמו
גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע
כי אתה עמדי
שבטך ומשענתך חמה ינחמוני
תערוך לפני שולחן נגד צוררי
דשנת בשמן ראשי
כוסי רוויה
אך טוב וחסד ירדפוני כל ימי חיי
ושבתי בבית יהוה לאורך ימים

*want – I shall not need for any thing

** protect

***I'm fulfilled with joy

“.... and these words shall fill your heart and give you joy
and peace - nor shall you be afraid.”

Over a hundred years ago, with a third “dispersion” of the Jews, this time from the ghettos of Europe into the world at large, came an emancipation also from the dogma and religious laws that had burdened so many a Jewish life. Many a free thinker was just too happy to be released from this outmoded yoke.

Gradually, however, many of these freed Jews began to feel also a loss of something that defied definition. Their “freedom” missed out on something for which a spirit and soul yearns. One of the problems for a return to orthodox Judaism is a scepticism of many archaic practices and to a God who seems to be doing everything in his power to mess things up – an inexplicably bad job of managing HIS world.

Although the writer refers here to Orthodox Jewish practices, it's only right to realise that since earliest times, all religious practices (whether, primitive or philosophically “advanced”, begin with a need in the human to acknowledge a power greater than oneself. The forms these take, serve essentially the same purpose: the feeling of being under the power and “protection” of something far greater than mere man and natural evolution.

The “rationalistic” relationship to God set out in these few words does not come to deny a *belief* in a Deity as set out in Jewish orthodox practice but rather to bring to the non-believer, the fulfilment of a need, a hunger one feels but finds impossible to define.

So

We, who denounce the existence of an Almighty God; a living, Compassionate God who (apparently) cares not a jot about human suffering, anguish and pain; we who, however, feel there surely is “something”, but can’t name it; who feel that as grand as The Bible may be, it can never be an Ultimate Truth; we who in our darkest hours of trial call out in agony, “Help me, God!!” We who feel an emptiness, a darkness within ourselves - a shadow - yet know not how to flood this dark with light or fill a void with meaning; this writing reaches out. There *is* another way.

For some it will be the start of a true adventure and, as in any true adventure, there will be difficulties, hidden dangers, dilemmas even abysses to pass, yet the excitement of the journey can draw a seeker on. It’s a journey into our own inner selves; a re-searching of child-hood pains; a search in a soul for pains that still torment and seek a healing. Perhaps the only healer possible - the one deep inside ones own self.

“Be my own psychologist? Impossible! How?”

Come with me, then. I’ve been there and can show the way.

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From youth, even from babyhood(!), there were so many acts done and things said to each of us that we felt and, often, still feel were unjust and painful. Many of these follow us down the years in the subconscious. They influence and disturb our lives. If we could just reach back to “heal” these pains, “release” their perpetrators, a great sense of relief and love would not only heal these wounds but also bring to a mind troubled by daily cares and worries a feeling of peace and enveloping love.

With some of us, there exists a sense of emptiness – “something” missing in our lives defying fulfilment. Such seekers are willing to give fortunes for this satisfaction many winding up in the mountains with this or that obliging Guru.

If we further our search and find a source from which to fill a hungry soul, the rewards, the satisfaction, the “completion” of ones being will outweigh by far the effort and time given to it. It can be the very light in the dark we seek, as a gentle rain to growth and as freshened air that heals. BUT one needs the kind of self-discipline that can be found behind any successful diet or physical fitness program.

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A “Catalyst” - Meditative Prayer

The Bible and related prayers accompanied our forefathers for a hundred generations. These play an important part in our makeup, our past, in which lie periods of success through determination and strength, failures through weakness and fear.

The Bible, and its many companion treatise are, surely the greatest works ever to come to print. In them there are lessons within lessons to give lustre to a lack-lustre life. Many of these come from some of the greatest minds that ever lived - one of the most illustrious of these, the renowned Moses Maimonides. If such a scintillating mind finds sublime living in the depths of these works, surely there must be something in them for an energetic mind. This, apart from *believing* that we are under the constant surveillance of a lining God. So many ideas in the philosophical words are of distinction. Many the inspired poet who composed from the Bible the most memorable lines.

If the reader has no feelings at all for this great work, there's no need to read on, for the Bible and the *prayers derived from it* form the basis of this journey to help fill a soul with a contentment most feel impossible to reach.

There can be little doubt that the demands made on one to reach a level of reasonable comfort in life makes demands on time; so much so that other, very important things such as exercise and health, mental as well as bodily, tend to take a back seat. One of the most difficult yet most *rewarding* is the time required for such exercising of the mind, self-discipline and self-restraint.

Those who at this point say – “Life is difficult enough as it is. I work hard and have little enough enjoyment. Let me alone – let me be!” are betting on a loser. That’s a fact – and, secretly, each in their heart of hearts knows it! It must be well known to most that *some eighty percent of the “luck” in our lives is a result of our own decisions and acts!*

Each of us makes choices. Of course we can sympathise for those who suffer REAL bad luck; brought them, perhaps, to a life with no love and no childhood and finally, through pain, to drug addiction and a sad end. Our sympathy is with them but this is not our quest here. Ours is to the average and often successful of us who just have no time to give to some irresponsible God whose “works” leave us perplexed. Our search is not for such a God but for a TRUTH that leads to an inner balance and joy of life. There can be no greater joy than a singing heart in a well-functioning body – a happy mind.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to ourselves is to begin to live “clean” – and that takes self-discipline and time.

It could happen that the very first words that jump at us are, “I am the Lord thy God that brought you out of the land of Egypt” – to freedom. To each is given the freedom to make choices and as wonderful as this freedom is, it’s here that so many of us make embittering mistakes.

In order to create a base for meditative prayer, we must first define GOD for ourselves, for without a definition to which (whom?) we can relate and associate in all honesty, we have done nothing.

For those of us for whom an anthropomorphic God just does not exist, let THE SUM TOTAL OF POWERS AND SENSES WITHIN EACH OF US, (LIFE), *represent* GOD. Lets cradle LIFE as if cupped in the palms of our hands. Hold it gently, reverently with the greatest RESPECT and LOVE, for without LIFE we are nothing but a clod of earth. And this REAL God is more, FAR MORE than this. He is the SUM TOTAL also of all the powers of the universe – the ions of space that speed through our bodies, the sun's and galaxial "winds" that influence all life. The myriad of forces we all live with in and out of this, our small planet. A "God" that does not care a hoot whether one lives or dies; a "God" that gives LIFE then says: "Take it from here."

Here, in this World, in order to actively bring to our lives our totality of inner powers to work for us, we shall call them GODLY POWERS – they shall be for each the SPARK OF GOD *and this we all possess*. This basic TRUTH is not denied even by the most orthodox religious. Thus we have begun our meditation by making God something we know to be REAL and TRUE. Within and "without".

Does this God "LOVE"?

Only if we accept ourselves for what we are and possess – i.e. "love" ourselves! This creates a force within us that is not only extremely powerful but it's as real as we ourselves are. *But this stage of self- acceptance may be reached normally only after lengthy "meditative prayer" and self examination*. So many of us have been in "conflict" with ourselves for most of our lives BUT to cleanse this from the system requires time and concentration – and if this *love* is reached, we shall suddenly discover GOD'S LOVE for us! AND THIS LOVE IS REAL.

“Is not loving ourselves being self-centred and egoistic? Not if it means getting to love ourselves for what we are; our limitations and defects as well as our strengths – not being unhappy that we are not taller or more attractive but, coming to terms with what we are and loving ourselves. Such acceptance puts a smile on the face and immediately makes one more attractive than one was.

When (if) this stage is reached, amazingly we find we shall sympathise and love our fellow man and love will flood our own lives with a joy unrealised until this time!

Love for others is a great potential for good health. It reflects back upon the doer as much, if not more, than one gives!

The little piece of GOD within us is all those functions over which we have no control. They are the “overlords” of our very existence, Brain, Heart, Liver, Kidney ... but there are others too: imagination and make-believe; emotions: fear, love and hate; all these hold sway over us and react instinctively to outside or mental stimulation. Panic, too!

This tiny bit of God within also represents for you, the prayor, all the wonders of Creation. This should lead to an uplift of soul - an excitement of who and what we are.

If this approach has not struck a chord, probably this philosophy won't suit your make-up for we have reached an important time to ponder - to reflect and not just race on, for meditation and deliberation is much a part of what this is all about.

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“We’ve said much about the glory of the Bible and associative (or meditative) prayer, what about the many מצוות – the more than six hundred commandments that Orthodox Jewry are commanded to obey. Lets look at these POSITIVELY – that those we can carry out without much trouble will certainly make us just that much more special. The Friday candles. The white table cloth. The wine. All these add to an atmosphere that is special – and, of course the blessing. These should not be “forced” but agreed to by the couple and enjoyed – for conflict is something that must be avoided at all costs! Each commandment carried out is a PLUS to us, each “don’t” commandment we do – a MINUS – and it’s certainly true that the more we carry out with deliberation and joy, the more SPECIAL we shall feel.

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“Why an “Authorised” Prayer book? Anything wrong with my words?” Indeed no! BUT there are several good reasons for using the accepted script for brilliant minds gave much thought to them.

If one takes or has *any* pride in his own history; in a Book that has captured the imagination of the world; a Book that outweighs by far any works written by any single author; of belonging to this Nation, then this pride must be the first stepping stone of the journey. The words of this Book of Books not only conform to our traditional past they are a mainstay - the *pedestal* upon which each of us should feel we stand. The composers were not only wise but many great poets whose levels of inspiration few may reach.

Using these words as catalyst, meditative prayer takes on an effect of *action and reaction* within us. Their effect can be

astonishing *IF we picture the words in our mind's eye and create a personalised association as we read*. Think, concentrate upon them – let them create pictures in the mind. These “pictures” can become truly beautiful as reflections from a diamond. For each of us they will be different, but for each also real.

So is God Listening? Obviously – for it is we who are listening. And not only listening but **reacting** to our prayers also. And since each one of us is a little bit of HIM its we, first and foremost that are not only “hearing” and listening but interpreting them to give us satisfaction and benefit.

Strict observers in religious practice may think that all this is sacrilegious but is it? Reciting prayers “blindly” is “allowed” but making them meaningful not! Anyway, if our behaviour externally conforms with religious practices in the congregation, who is to know of personal interpretations? With the orthodox, it's the ACTION that counts and not the thought. So let our prayer shawl be of the best, so too our phylacteries. Something to make us feel proud in the ownership of them. Proud of our past, proud to be what we are.

All important is to let the words guide us philosophically through these pictures we create. These shall make us aware of the good in our lives - beginning with life itself - of our behaviour towards ourselves, to others. *Fully AWARE* of the senses we possess: sight, touch, taste – all of them. So many things we take for granted. The food we have, the beauty in our surroundings – the sun, the rain, the sky.

Who feels that they are *blessed with sight* until it is lost?

Not by chance, in the first of the fifteen proscribed morning blessings we thank God for the ability to differentiate between darkness and light. Sight! And when reciting a blessing for a morning's sunrise, we could also feel that a new world is being re-created; a miracle we take for granted. This can give real joy and a legitimate line of thought. There are so many blessings to make us AWARE of things that we would otherwise take for granted. Many would accuse this approach of "make-believe" unrealistic BUT it's not! It's seeing the good in what would otherwise be otherwise only a grey, cold and forbidding day.

There are also negative acts in our lives that cause rot to build up inside us. These "ferment", beginning subconsciously they embitter one eventually effecting our body chemistry – even forming a face which speaks volumes of the person behind it. We see such faces, around us each day. The faces of people who see so much fault in things – little good.

If we (suddenly?) become aware of a tree we pass every day and never paid real attention to it, surely we've missed out on an opportunity to add a little colour to our day? "Good morning, Tree!" Mad? No! Very appropriate. This picture, too, comes at us in a proscribed blessing. *And any blessing in one's heart and mind will be to a LISTENING and an aproving GOD WITHIN.* This creates an up-lift - an inner smile - an atmosphere that helps to make a day happier and more successful!

So with such reaction within us, we should certainly begin to feel a positive strengthening, especially) in times of stress and trial.

“Bless you, God for the food we have – for feeding and giving life to *all things* of flesh with your goodness and bounty...”

There are so many blessings that we praise God for so very many acts that fall far short of the words of the blessing. Feeding all living creatures, healing the sick, supporting the weak – so many blessings that fall far short of the mark.

The religious person fervently, is thankful for whatever is received. Unfortunately, many simply say the blessings out of habit so according to this “theorist” – what good does this do?

We may well question the blessing of gratitude for “... feeding all living creatures...” What of the starving in so many parts of the world? Or the fallen that stay down? Is this God’s bounty?

The pious composers of prayer and psalm, crediting God with being most bountiful and showing care for all living creatures is, surely, a purposeful exaggeration ‘*encouraging*’ Him so to do?

For us, we do not question such act as coming from a *cruel God* but remain tuned to a world managed by plausible ACTION and REACTION within ourselves always focusing on the “half full” cup.

In a realistic approach to prayer we feed a soul hungry for a dialogue with a power that is in the mind, spirit and soul. After all, ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ are words to be found in any dictionary in spite of human inability to reach an exact definition.

Many of us know of very wealthy people lacking nothing that can be bought yet with terrible a feeling of an “emptiness” in life.

Joining a synagogue gives also a beneficial addition in sharing life within the local community in which we live. A feeling

that we are part of other families with joys and sorrows too with births, bar-mitzvahs marriages and deaths. We become a *somebody* among these people – an extended family? - part of something larger than just ourselves.

Another reward of mental activity is, I firmly believe, a preservation of it by actively concentrating and memorising. Of course it takes effort but so do exercising and dieting all of which add to good living. “Use it or lose it” – a succinct Americanism and so true.

Within a (religious?) community and taking part in community prayer has its benefits but also requires of us behaviour that will not upset orthodox behaviour and conform to tradition. Okay, it means learning the ins and outs of communal religious activity and this means respect for others and their particular kind of belief; not causing embarrassment to oneself or others.

The sum total of our acts should be the building of a Temple within ourselves. This includes a veneration of the source and foundation of this religious practise - not being judgemental about another's ways. We are not doing this process to change things for others but to make them meaningful for ourselves. Many an orthodox religious person is often proud to help another seeking a meaningful relationship with God with the essentials of accepted conduct and practice. Accept this as a great gift.

The psalms, written in the language of poets make wonderful subjects to commit to memory excerpts of which make “mantras” that put “positive atmosphere” into us. Their effect is calming and thought-provoking. Real!

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A MEDITATIVE look at the main prayer at any session:

The Smona Estrei –or eighteen blessings.

(The end of Morning Prayers i.e. שחרית .

Have you, the reader, taken the first step of peeking at a prayer book? If not, this is the time to do so. Preferably is should also include the Psalms. In the daily morning service there will be found שמונה עשרה or תפילה. These eighteen ritual blessings form the essence of the morning prayer which, including the psalms. The prayer book comes to the individual *instead* of the Temple Service by the Cohanim of times gone by.

I'll try here to give an example of applying the imagination to the actual words of prayer. A way to personalise an *association* with the words so that the words “fit” our own outlook and philosophy. Here goes:

In the prayer book, even before we start a first blessing, there is a remarkable and beautiful beginning:

ו'...ה' שפתי תפתח ופי יגיד תהלתך
O' God, open thou my lips and I shall declare Your praise.

Its so easy to take for granted that we possess the ability to speak, praise – use our minds. Do such a “simple” act as opening our lips and mouths to declare praise! Nothing, therefore, not even such a simple act should be taken for granted ... and then the meaning of AWARENESS and being HAPPY for this ability too becomes alive and vibrant. Becomes also meaningful to the PRAYOR. (There's no such word in English but we need it.)

The ה'. In Hebrew the ה' often stands for God for HIS NAME is not used unless directly addressing HIM purposefully. With us, this sacred name will act for the powers within which we

live; that work the universe, the heart, the kidney, the liver - the sanctity of life and love.

The first blessing of תפילה, (The eighteen ritual blessings of prayer) directs our thoughts to the founders of monotheism; our forefathers, Abraham, Izaak and Jakob.

Comment: The thought that our family lineage goes far back should have a positive effect upon us. We are not a nondescript race from some unknown set of genes but have a direct link to a man who created monotheism and became the fountain-head of an individual who begat a unique nation.

2. The second: You are all powerful. אתה גיבור...Of course these powers are all powerful, and there's no question of this.

Comment: It's our AWARENESS of what we POSSESS, no matter how meagre it may be that is important. The magic in a loaf of bread - a bowl of hot soup. This "simple" things should not be just something that a little money purchased but perhaps in a slice of bread, we may visualise the seed that was planted; the soil, rain, sun. The magic (creation) of a seed that germinated in earth under a sky that provided rain and sun. The loaf or slice of bread is a wonder of nature. A blessing with this in mind should elevate us and give us joy.

There are so many agnostics among us today. Their motto: "You have to be REALISTIC in a hard, REALISTIC world." Nobody denies that. It's the other side of the coin we are talking about. Going to a movie – even taking a holiday overseas may relax one for a while but a few days later that wonderful feeling has quite dissipated and gone. A long term good feeling rests in a way of life and so much comes with MEDITATIVE PRAYER.

.. מכלכל חיים בחסד "You (God) sustain us generously ... making us AWARE of what we HAVE (not what we LACK).

.. סומך נופלים support the fallen... helps one out of a low.

.. רופא חולים heal the sick... Doesn't an optimistic attitude in meditation help to keep one well? Of course it does!

.. מתיר אסורים "release those (that feel) captive"... So often we feel captives in a relentless way of life. A mental 'holiday' from this is most rewarding and a "session" with a prayer book can do just that.

"But what benefit can the meditative reader gain from the blessing: מחיה המתים, (according to the pophet Iziyah, the dead shall rise by the word of God).

One way to bring this 'down to earth' is to think of these very words of God we are reading waking us up to become aware of so much we were 'dead' to before we began! Another, dear departed ones (to us) 'live' as long as the living remember and bless their memory. When Iziyah mentions that those bones will "live", it's pretty obvious to me that this was not to be taken literally but there will rise up new generations to take their place. Nothing more. Aren't WE in their place?

There is often an unexpected uplift from reading the right words in times of depression. A strengthened spirit followed by the best actions we possess, go a long way to make things come out right – and if not? At least we have benefit from our reading and meditating. We know, too, we tried and couldn't do better.

.. מוריד הגשם... You bring the rain. Nothing much we can do about this except to hope – and smile recalling the last rain we enjoyed.

אתה קדוש... "You are holy. Holiness begins with our attitude towards ourselves and to others. Holiness, an attitude we create!

אתה חונן לאדם דעת... "You grant wisdom..." To be aware of our mental capabilities – as limited as we feel these may be. These can be STRENGTHENED by concentration, learning and memorising.

סלח לנו... "Forgive us our sins." In order to have a "clean" atmosphere within ourselves, let us be lenient enough to forgive those that hurt us. Look to the wrongs we did and try to right them. This will be a real FORGIVENESS and a strengthening of our own happiness. A great reward – a real forgiveness!

ראה בעניינו... "Be aware of our misery.." Bring this down to earth by each of us making ourselves aware and sad for the misery around us. Let us try to relieve even a little of this from any one individual, or more. The more one GIVES to others --the more one will RECEIVE in return.! Ever tried it? It really works!

רפאנו... "Heal us..." Isn't this process of meditative prayer self healing? Little more need be said.

ברך את השנה הזאת... "Bless this year as a year of plenty.." AWARENESS, again is the name of the game.

I'm sure the general trend is understood by these few examples and there's no need to go through more with the exception of the last two of the eighteen:

מודים אנו לך... "We acknowledge, thank and are aware that you are the rock (the strength) of our lives ..." By now this should be self explanatory except for the joy we should be feeling from all the aforesaid blessings upon which we have meditated. "You

are our strength and protector ... for all generations..." Surely no need for explanations.

And the last blessing of the eighteen: (שמונה עשרה)

... שים שלום "Grant us peace ..." Isn't that what this meditative prayer is all about? With PRACTICE and ENDEAVOUR reward will come --to each according to his effort and self-discipline.

I consider "the light that your face projects..." I consider as enlightenment to inner peace and tranquility that comes to us throughout these words. A most befitting and beautiful end to a prayer "session".

There are so many situations where the psalms come to our aid; raise our spirits, give hope when all we have is a feeling of helplessness:

Psalm 30. מזמור שיר חנוכה הבית לדוד..
בערב ילין בכי ובבוקר רינה..
Nothing but words of encouragement and hope. It's so common that when tired we feel depressed and down but after a good rest, are back on our feet again and ready to go. What's wrong with acknowledging this as an act of God? The God within us.

Psalm 23. ...ה' רועי לא אחסר.
And the best known of all: "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want (for anything), He leadeth me beside the still waters ..." Ever thought about "still waters"? There the silt has fallen and the waters become clear and refreshing. Beautiful!

The order of sacrifices is, on the whole, considered outmoded. Great are the words of Isayah who after the destruction of the Temple declared: וְנִשְׁלֶמָה פְּרִים שְׁפֹתֵינוּ... (The utterance of our lips will take the place of the sacrificing of bulls - The "highest" sacrifice in Temple times.)

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We should close our books and leave the synagogue with a lighter step; a feeling of renewed strength and joy of life. We stand upright and repeat:

"My body is clean and beautiful. All things extraneous have been dissipated - melted away and gone. My blood runs free and strong – my mind and body sing a song." This should be repeated over and over. יהיו לרצון אמרי פי ה' צורי וגואלי. (May my words find favour with you my Lord and Savior

I leave you with the three-fold blessing (by the Cohanim) which comes at the end of the eighteen blessings of the morning prayer:

"May God bless you and guard you"

"May God make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you."

"May God turn his face upon you and grant you peace."

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A Subject So Many Avoid

The more I gain knowledge with the Jewish Philosophy UNDERLYING orthodox teachings, I realise that beneath all lies a **secret** that may **never** be divulged:

God is an abstract, reached only through the higher human intellect and philosophy.

This “secret” may never be divulged since this kind of intellect is possessed by only a few, whereas a BELIEF should give hope and direction to the masses. This necessitates simplicity of design for understanding and direction .

Moses was, indeed, a great philosopher.