

'Beyond all praises that we can utter...'

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Religion Editor

*Oh Lord,*

*Oooo, You are so big.*

*So absolutely huge.*

*We're all really impressed down here, I can tell You.*

*Forgive us, O Lord, this our dreadful toadying,*

*But You're so keen and wonderful and, well, super.*

– Monty Python's "The Meaning of Life"

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I don't actually know much about "God," so I can't say with certainty whether or not the foregoing accurately describes the relationship between ourselves and that-which-we-call-God.

However, I think it's an accurate description of prayer, or at least of what we imagine prayer to be, most of the time and in a cursory way. We don't think about prayer all that much except when we're in church, synagogue, or some sort of calamity.

In that way, prayer is different from sex. But as I wrote in a previous column, the two are similar in some important ways:

- Each seeks to connect us to something outside ourselves, something which (ideally) we love, respect, and hold in awe.
- Each is an experience so personal and mysterious that it's hard to talk about – or even know that we *can* talk about it.

I've been doing a lot of studying and thinking lately about prayer – what it means, how and why it's done, what it's for. However, in addition to being fairly ignorant of "God," I'm also fairly ignorant of non-Jewish forms of prayer. So if what I say makes no sense within the context of your own particular faith, please feel free to ignore it.

The people who invented prayer seemed to imagine "God" as an all-knowing, all-powerful entity, which gets grouchy if humanity ignores It. But if "God" knows everything, including what we're thinking, and will do whatever "God" wants regardless of our opinion, what's the point? What effect does prayer have on "God?"

This question used to trouble me a lot, especially when I was a little kid sitting uncomfortably in synagogue when I would rather have been outside playing. But recently, I re-framed the question more meaningfully: "What effect does prayer have on me?"

Within Jewish tradition, prayer is a highly structured affair which follows three basic forms: petitionary ("God, give me such-and-such"), gratitude ("Thanks a lot, God"), and praise ("God, you're really cool").

This last group, which contains innumerable blessings for certain actions or circumstances, holds – for me, at least – the key to what prayer is all about.

The Hebrew word for "prayer" is "tefila" which is related to the words "to judge" or "to differentiate."

Tefila is an introspective process, having less to do with waving our hands to get "God's" attention than with increasing our own – opening our eyes to ourselves, to others, to our world. It's a reminder that, despite what our egos tell us, we're not the center of the universe. But it's also a reminder that what we do, matters.

In other words, it's about looking for that little spark of connectedness that flows through the impossible fragility of our day-to-day existence.

For most people, life means struggling with kids, jobs, housing, pain and triumph. It's easy to forget that you're just a speck of protoplasm on a little ball of rock, whizzing around a blob of hot gas for no reason that you'll ever live long enough to figure out. Easy to forget that the mere fact of your being-here-now-and-knowing-it is so absurd, so tragic and happy – all at once – as to defy comprehension.

I think that, for those who need or desire it and who pursue it diligently, tefila is a way of tapping into that perspective – but only if we really feel it. This principle is illustrated by the following story:

A rabbi once came upon a porter in the marketplace, who was reciting the alphabet, eyes shut and with great fervor. When the man was finished, the rabbi asked him what he was doing.

“Well, I am unlearned in the ways of prayer,” said the porter. “So I recite the alphabet, in hopes that God will arrange the letters in a manner pleasing to Him.”

Whereupon the rabbi proclaimed the porter to be the holiest person he'd ever met. As would, I hope, any of us.