

Making Prayer My Own



By: Rabbi Hyiam Reiffman

My wife, Carolyn, recently returned from a trip as an advisor for the Denver Academy of Torah (DAT) High School's delegation at Yeshiva University's Model UN program. While she was sharing her experience with me, I was pleasantly surprised at the level of commitment that some of the students she was chaperoning had toward Tefillah (prayer). After getting off the redeye at Laguardia, they stopped at a Dunkin Donuts for breakfast. But before eating, one of the girls asked if the sun had come up yet; she wanted to determine if they could eat breakfast right away, or if they should wait until after they prayed Shacharit (the morning service). Prayer was clearly in the forefront of the mind of this student.

So, how do some students get to the point where prayer is important to them? How do they find meaning in Tefillah? I believe that everyone is different. For some it might be innate. Others students need a little help.

I have recently had the privilege of helping DAT partner with an organization called the Online Judaic Studies Consortium (OJSC). This community helps pair schools with online Judaic Studies classes that the school might not otherwise have access to. As part of this partnership, I wrote a course about Tefillah last year, and am teaching it this year to a group of twelfth graders in Westchester, NY. The course, *Making Prayer My Own: Finding Meaning in the Siddur*, is designed to provide students the opportunity to study sections of the Siddur, and focus on a deep exploration of the meaning of particular prayers. A main emphasis of the course is to help students go beyond the rote understanding of the prayers, and to powerfully connect and interface with them, ultimately creating an experience that is relevant, meaningful, and inspirational.

I have been teaching for almost 30 years, and I was excited to take on the challenge of writing and teaching an online course, especially one which focused on the spiritual, emotional, and affective side of Judaism. What I didn't expect was the significant effect it would have on not only the students, but on me as well. I have thoroughly enjoyed engaging in my students'

thoughts and ideas about Tefilah, and I have loved following their interactions with one another; they are so real, honest, and pure. When I signed on to teach this course, I never thought that “I” would benefit from it, but the amazing comments and insights that have been shared have truly been an inspiration to me, allowing *me* to grow alongside my students.

More and more, as I facilitate the course and engage in the students' comments and thoughts, I realize how blessed I am to be part of this community. The students are truly taking this course to heart. For example, one of my students posted, “I think it's great how much this course is improving our lives!” Another said, "I would like to reiterate the fact that without this course, I would be missing so much in my life. It is helping me fulfill my potential."

It has truly been an inspiration for me to hear the many ways in which this course has touched and influenced the lives of my students, and I look forward to continuing to do my best to help each and every one get the most out of their prayer experience.

[Learn more about *Making Prayer My Own: Finding Meaning in the Siddur*](#)