

# PRAYING with *Fire*

## PRAYER POINTS



## Winding Up God

by Rabbi David Schallheim

*Looking back, that raucous 1970s rock tune had it all wrong.*

Riding on a public bus often catapults me into the past. My ears perked up, recently, when I heard the radio start playing music from the raucous rock band of the 70s, Jethro Tull:

*You can ex-communicate me on my way to Sunday School  
and have all the bishops harmonize these lines...*

*I don't believe you, you got the whole damn thing all wrong  
He's not the kind you have to wind up on Sunday.*

I don't want to date myself, but these lines brought me back to my rebellious high school days as a post Bar Mitzvah teenager in Southern California, who couldn't find a more perfect expression of his disdain of organized religion than the second side of *Aqualung*.

Although the local congregation we attended generally made do with "winding God up" once or twice a year on the High Holidays, Jethro Tull's message remained the same. And since our family was of the

Temple faithful who attended services virtually every week, Friday night seemed to me as legitimate an object of resentment as Sunday did to Jethro Tull.

## **Doing for God?**

The source of this resentment is a basic misconception. We tend to think we're doing God a big favor when we go to services or the like. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Sages made this point in a startling way. Imagine you're fasting on Yom Kippur, spending the entire day in the synagogue, doing teshuva -- repentance -- for everything you can think of. The congregation reaches Neilah -- the concluding service, the holiest prayer of all, recited only once a year on Yom Kippur afternoon, at the end of a day we've been acting like angels. We're all thinking: "I'm fasting, I'm praying. Look how much I'm doing for God!"

## **The mitzvot are opportunities to achieve greatness.**

Here the Sages make a statement that appears nowhere else in the liturgy, based on a verse in the Book of Job (35:7): "Even though man be righteous, what can he give You?" God is complete, perfect. Nothing we do will benefit Him. The mitzvot? These are opportunities that God, in His love for us, gave us to achieve true greatness. We are not doing God a favor, rather God is giving us the opportunity of a lifetime.

What more apropos place to make this point than at the end of Yom Kippur, when we're sorely tempted to feel holy?

## **Reflexive Prayer**

For some people, communal prayer presents a strong obstacle. How can prayer be meaningful if everyone has to recite the exact same words? How can the prayers be fixed at certain times? Are we supposed to open up our hearts to God like clockwork?

In other words, does God need us to "wind Him up"?

Perhaps a misunderstanding arises from the Hebrew word *tefilla*, inadequately translated as "prayer." The verb *l'hitpalel* -- "to pray" -- is a reflexive verb, meaning that it is something done to oneself. Obviously, this does not mean that we pray to ourselves. So in what respect is Jewish prayer reflexive?

## **Jewish prayer is an act of introspection.**

Prayer is reflexive because it brings us face to face with the great harmony at the core of our existence. The root "*pallel*" means to inspect. The reflexive form, therefore, is an act of personal introspection. When we pray, we look inside and ask, "What do I need to change about myself in order to get what I really want out of life?"

Jewish prayer is nourishment for the soul, and we need it three times a day, like clockwork.

I keep a 70-year-old gold watch, which belonged to my grandfather, next to my state-of-the-art laptop, to remind myself of a lot of things: Where I came from, the benefits I enjoy from the incredible progress of technology, and the amazing craftsmanship of yesteryear (the watch works pretty well, will my laptop work even five years from now?) I enjoy winding up the watch. It reminds me that valuable things need constant attention.

Maybe, if it was carefully explained, even Jethro Tull could understand that we're not "winding God up," but rather we're the ones who need to be "wound up." And maybe, if it were explained carefully, that rebellious teenager would have understood, too.