Let us conclude this volume with several thoughts on prayer, which is a vital force and a meaningful aspect of our lives.

I’ve been praying since childhood, as I was brought up to do, but it is only rather recently, after turning 80, that I think I may finally be getting it right. One might ask, “Isn’t it deplorable, that for over 70 years you’ve not been praying properly?” I find great consolation in a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, who said that prayers that are not said with the proper kavannah (concentration, intent, sincerity) do not ascend to heaven. However, they are never lost. Rather they remain, as it were, in a holding pattern, and when one recites a single prayer with the proper kavannah, that prayer ascends to heaven and in its wake carries with it all the earlier prayers that were lacking in kavannah. It is much like water that has been restrained behind a dam. If one makes a tiny hole in the dam, it allows all the backed-up water to flow through. Similarly, a single prayer said with the proper kavannah enables all the prayers that were held back to ascend to heaven. It may have indeed taken a long time for me to get the knack of prayer, but it has redeemed

338 / EFFECTIVE LIVING
the decades of prayer that may have been lacking in *kavannah*.

In the past, I had not paid adequate attention to a prayer found in some comprehensive prayer books, “The Prayer Before Prayer,” composed by the Chassidic master, Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk. Its underlying premise is that prayer is vital to proper living. The Talmud says that the world stands on three pillars: Torah study, service of G-d, and deeds of loving-kindness (*Ethics of the Fathers* 1:2). The Torah says, *Serve G-d with all your heart* (*Deuteronomy* 11:13), and the Talmud says that “service of G-d with all one’s heart” refers to prayer (*Taanis* 2a). Inasmuch as prayer is so essential a need, then just as one prays for all one’s other needs, one should pray for the ability to pray! In this introductory prayer, Rebbe Elimelech says, “... and help me that I should see only the merits in my fellow men and not their faults.” What a beautiful concept! Rebbe Elimelech posits that our relationship to G-d in prayer can be favorable only if our attitude toward our fellow human beings is favorable as well.

The Talmud is very emphatic that prayer must be recited with proper *kavannah*. *Do not make your prayer rote, but rather [beg for] compassion and supplication before G-d* (*Ethics of the Fathers* 2:18).

A number of incidents over the years have come together to change the character of my prayer, and as an octogenarian, I feel greater enthusiasm and excitement during prayer.

I have been the beneficiary of some incidents and stories that have helped me transform my prayer. Let me share them with you.

I was at the Kosel (Western Wall), reciting (Tehillim) *Psalms*. I saw a man who was blind being escorted to the Wall. He ran his fingers over the massive stones, and I thought he was feeling the centuries of history. He kissed the Wall gently, then began an excited monologue, of which I could catch just a few words. Abruptly he stopped, paused momentarily and said, “Oh, I think I already told You that yesterday.”

I was electrified. He was talking to G-d. He knew that G-d
was listening, and had heard him yesterday, so there was no need to repeat that conversation.

This was a powerful lesson. Not only did that man have firm belief that G-d was listening, but also that there was no need to repeat what he had said to G-d previously. While it may seem as if our prayers are just words repetitiously recited by rote, that is not what they are intended to be. The words of prayer compiled by the Men of the Great Assembly are a springboard from which we can rise to a loftier spiritual level. When we daven with the proper intent, our prayer is elevated to a conversation with G-d, Who indeed hears every word. Prayer should not be mouthed by rote; rather it should have a freshness daily.

Rav Saadia Gaon (10th century) once lodged at an inn. The innkeeper did not recognize him. The following day, someone informed the innkeeper of the identity of his guest. The innkeeper apologized profusely to Rav Saadia.

“Why are you apologizing?” Rav Saadia asked. “You treated me well.”

The innkeeper said, “But, if I had known who you are, I would have related to you with much greater respect.”

Rav Saadia began to weep. “Yesterday, I worshiped G-d according to my understanding of His majesty. If I had known yesterday what I know of Him today, my worship would have been so much greater.”

We should make a concerted effort to add to our spirituality every day. In that way, we can improve our prayer daily. Sometimes we can turn a negative into a positive.

I attended a meeting of the Hidden Child Foundation. This group is comprised of people who survived the Holocaust because they were taken in by non-Jews. One woman was the sole survivor of her entire family. Her parents and seven siblings had been murdered by the Nazis. She said, “I go to the synagogue every Sabbath, but I don’t pray. I sit...
there in silent protest. I want G-d to see that I refuse to pray to Him.”

Negative? By no means! This woman has a profound faith that G-d exists; otherwise there would be no point to her protest. Furthermore, she believes in His omnipotence, otherwise there would be no reason to be angry at Him. Finally, she believes He is present in the synagogue, because that’s where she goes to register her protest. I wonder whether those people who do pray have as firm convictions as this woman. She taught me much.

At a retreat for recovering addicts, Bernice said, “I was so envious of you this morning. I walked by the room where the services were being held, and I saw you praying. I wish I could pray, but I know nothing about prayer.”

I said, “Let me get this straight. You were envious of me because I was praying and you could not pray. Let’s look at this from G-d’s perspective.” I continued, attributing to Hashem a possible human reaction. “G-d sees me walking into the synagogue and says, ‘Uh-oh! Here comes Twerski again. I wonder what he wants this time. He’s always asking, “G-d, give me this” or “G-d, give me that.’”

“Then G-d sees you and says, ‘There’s My child, Bernice. She is heartbroken because she wants to reach Me, but does not know how.’ Now, tell me. Whose prayer is more pleasing to G-d? My verbalized prayer or your silent prayer?”

The primacy of kavannah in prayer is illustrated by this symbolic episode involving the Chassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

One Rosh Hashanah, the congregation was waiting for the sounding of the shofar, but Rabbi Levi Yitzchak did not allow the services to proceed. Noting the impatience of the worshipers, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak explained, “There is a young man who was orphaned as a child. No one looked

Praying — The Right Way / 341
after him, and he was never taught to daven. Today, noticing people streaming to services, he, too, wanted to pray, but could not read the siddur. He said, ‘Master of the Universe! I want to pray to You, but I don’t know how to read. All I remember are the letters of the alef-beis. So I will recite the letters, and You, G-d, can put them together to make up the words of the prayers.’”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak continued, “That is why we must delay the sounding of the shofar. We cannot get G-d’s attention now. He is busy putting together the letters of the alef-beis that the young man is reciting.”

The message to the congregation was clear. It is the kavanah and not just the words that constitute prayer.

Kavanah comes in various forms.

At a meeting of recovering alcoholics in Jerusalem, one man told his life story, then said, “When I first came to this program and was told that I must pray for help, I walked out. I was an avowed atheist and would have nothing to do with G-d.

“One day, I was walking along the beach in Tel Aviv. My wife had thrown me out of the house. I had no place to go except into the ocean. In desperation, I looked up to the sky and shouted, ‘If You’re up there, then help me!’ And He did help me. I’ve been sober for six years, and I’m back with my family.”

I associate this story with these words from Psalms 145:18, “G-d is close to all who call upon Him — to all who call upon Him sincerely.” This man’s cry for help was sincere.

I came across a story about Reb Hillel of Paritsch, a Chabad chassid.

Reb Hillel saw a person praying and crying profusely.
Assuming that the person was grieving for personal loss,
Reb Hillel inquired to find out what had happened. The man
replied, “I’m not crying out of grief, but out of pain. I believe that G-d instilled a Divine neshamah (soul) within me that aspires to spiritual goals. But this neshamah is forced to inhabit this coarse physical body that has so many drives and temptations that are anathema to the neshamah. How deeply the neshamah must be suffering to be trapped in such a body. I’m crying out of pain for my neshamah.”

When we are in physical or emotional pain, we pray for relief. If we appreciate the pain of the neshamah, we will pray for its relief.
Why Pray?

Why pray? Does G-d really need to hear how great He is? Furthermore, inasmuch as we assume that G-d knows our innermost thoughts, why do we have to verbalize prayer? Let’s just meditate. G-d knows what we’re thinking.

Various authorities have given reasons for the need to verbalize prayer. Here’s what I think.

As noted in an earlier chapter, the three principal themes in prayer are:

- Gratitude — I thank You, G-d
- Love — I love You, G-d
- Confession — I was wrong and I’m sorry.

**Gratitude:** Gratitude is one of the most fundamental and honorable human traits, yet is unfortunately frequently lacking. The prophet Isaiah makes a brilliant observation. After comparing the nation’s wayward behavior to that of irresponsible drunkards, the prophet says they are like *those weaned from [mother’s] milk …*” *(Isaiah 28:9)*. When a baby is satiated he/she simply turns away, from the source of nourishment until the child feels hungry again.* In


344 / EFFECTIVE LIVING
infancy, the pattern is established that when a desire is fulfilled, one does not express gratitude, and sometimes this early impression persists!

It is not unusual to hear a mother tell her five-year-old child, “Say ‘thank you’ to the nice man for the candy,” and the child either ignores her or grunts his words in disapproval. Developing gratitude requires overcoming the infantile impression, and is often not adequately achieved.

The importance of gratitude can be gathered from the fact that although we celebrate Shavuos as the day of the revelation and the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the most momentous event in Jewish history, the Torah makes no mention of this! Rather, it refers to the festival of Shavuos as Chag HaBikkurim, the Festival of the First-Ripened Fruits, when farmers brought their first-ripened fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem in a ritual of thanksgiving (see Deuteronomy 26:1-12). Our first words on awakening should be, Thank You, G-d, for another day of life. The practice of teaching this to tots is to quell the thoughtless ingratitude of the suckling infant. We must consistently remind ourselves not to take life, and indeed, anything we receive, for granted. Acknowledging that Hashem is the Source of all we have will enable us to forge a bond with Him. This bond will in turn foster feelings of love.

**Love:** Hashem’s love for us is obvious, as we reiterate every day in davening the blessings before the Shema, with the words (in the Ashkenaz nusach), “Ahavah Rabbah, with an ever-increasing love” or with the words (in the Sefard nusach), “Ahavas olam, with an eternal love You have loved us.” Such an overwhelming love manifests itself in so many ways that it naturally engenders a reciprocal love on our part. This love is built on the foundation of gratitude for all we have been given and the recognition that we have been the beneficiaries of all this largesse because of Hashem’s deep and abiding love for His nation.

In davening we have an opportunity to firmly establish this connection, forged in love by a loving G-d and His beloved people.

**Confession:** Confession of wrongdoing is also an important
element of prayer. It should not be too difficult to say, “I was wrong; I’m sorry.” Here, too, there seems to be a resistance that is rooted in childhood. The mother tells her six-year-old son, “Tell your sister that you’re sorry for hitting her,” but this meets with fierce resistance. Our minds can come up with ingenious rationalizations to justify our actions. It is rare, indeed, to readily own up to a mistake.

However, a wrongdoing can never adequately be rectified unless the perpetrator can admit to himself and to his victim that he has erred. The necessity to unburden one’s mind, heart, and conscience is a prime factor in the ability to move on and allow the relationship to flourish.

I believe that one of the reasons the Sages formulated prayer is because there is less resistance to expressing gratitude to G-d than to another human being; this holds true for the expression of love and for the confession of a wrong as well. That may be one reason that the Sages ordained prayer: Get into the habit of expressing gratitude and contrition to and love for G-d. Let the words roll off your tongue in prayer. Familiarize yourself with these words, and it will then be easier to say them to another person.

Three simple phrases: “I thank you. I love you. I was wrong and I’m sorry.” These are magic phrases. I can only wonder how many failed marriages could have been preserved if the husband and wife had used these magic phrases more often: “I thank you. I love you. I was wrong and I’m sorry.”

That’s why we must verbalize prayer: so that we hear and internalize these magical words.