

become "ready to remove all our character defects." This readiness consists of homework, of restraining our anger responses to provocations, of being considerate of others, of being meticulously honest. Only when we have done all we can do to overcome our character defects can we ask God to finish the job.\*

The prayer for step 11 extends the self-less concept. We "pray only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."

The overriding characteristic of an addict is bottomless desire for self-gratification. Whether the addiction is to alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, food, or anything else, nothing stands in the addict's way. The addict will push anyone and everyone out of the way—including spouse and children—to gratify the addictive drive. Recovery, therefore, requires a 180-degree reversal, to de-emphasize our wants and to make something else the goal in life—in this case, the will of God.

For prayer to be effective, it must be sincere and come from the heart. At an AA meeting in Jerusalem, a man who had not thought himself to be a believer related that when his drunkenness hit "rock-bottom," he found himself walking on the beach in Tel Aviv. "I had nowhere to go," he said. "My wife threw me out of the house. In desperation, I looked up to the sky and shouted, 'If You're up there, then help me!' and He helped me."

As I heard this, the verse in Psalms 145:18 went through my mind. "God is close to all who call upon Him—to all who call upon Him sincerely." That's the key word: *sincerely*.

## Responsibility

The path that we walk is one of co-creative partnership with God. So prayer for me is really the process of keeping myself aware of that truth, conscious of my responsibility. And constantly bringing myself back into alignment with the divine purpose.

RABBI NADYA GROSS

Self-growth is the immediate goal in engaging the difficult process of *teshuvah*. But it is never an end unto itself. In Judaism, the purpose of self-change is not to reach a state of bliss in a monastery. Rather, we hope to remove the obstacles that prevent us from responding to others with compassion and leading a life of integrity and service. If we succeed in straightening out our personalities, we are less self-occupied, more transparent, and more open to the world around us.

It's not just about my relationship with God. Yes, I want to feel good and connected and in alignment with my deeper self, but I also want to engage in soul refinement, to be a person who lives a life of compassion, integrity, truthfulness, the various *middot* [virtues] we name. The two go hand in hand and are inseparable. Where one starts varies with the individual, but to have a genuine flow of spirituality requires both.

DR. LINDA THAL

Jewish liturgy never lets us forget that we are part of a larger whole. In every service we pray for justice and communal redemption. We are responsible for more than ourselves.

## Prayer and Mussar

Started by Rabbi Israel Salanter, the Mussar (instruction, conduct) movement responded to both the rampant poverty and rapid assimilation of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jews by freshly reconnecting to the ethical and spiritual core of Judaism. Mussar teachings have been revived and popularized in the Jewish world in recent years, thanks in part to Rabbi Ira Stone. I asked him to comment on the role of prayer in Mussar.

In our culture, we're concerned with the salvation of our own soul. In Mussar, we are concerned with the salvation of our own soul based on how well we respond to the needs of

another. In fact, there is a statement credited to Rabbi Salanter that says, my spiritual needs are the material needs of my neighbor.

Prayer is me overhearing my neighbor. And by the way, my being overheard by my neighbor. So to the extent that my needs are in fact real, it makes me recognize that I can't solve them without the response and the help of another. At the same time that I'm crying out, I'm also hearing the cry.

One of the reasons that not only communal prayer, but also fixed prayer, is so important in Judaism is that it serves to interrupt my absorption with myself. When I follow a traditional structure for prayer, that structure overrides my mood or my spiritual situation at the moment. I have no choice but to stop. The impact of interrupting my own self-importance is profoundly important. And the beauty of this sort of a system is that as I stop and interrupt myself, I automatically give myself space to hear the other. The two things work together. Praying three times a day with a minyan has these two aspects simultaneously built in.

The only icon of God in the world is the voice of the other person. If I'm really going to connect to God it requires that I hear the voice of the other.

RABBI IRA STONE

## The Peace of Wholeness

Personal change and communal responsibility are seen as two parts of a whole and, when together, add up to more than the sum of the parts. Can we truly understand ourselves if we cannot listen well to others? Can we respond to others with compassion if we have no compassion for ourselves?

I think prayer helps cultivate an open heart because it helps us blur the lines between us. My father is an artist, and he used to teach me that the difference between a good painting

and a great painting is always in the lines. In a great painting, the lines breathe. I think that when we pray, we allow our lines to breathe, so that you are a little bit me and I am a little bit you and we are all a little bit God and everything breathes everything else.

Rabbi Heschel once said, "Prayer may not save us, but it makes us worth saving." I believe that as a river smooths the most ragged rocks, prayer soothes and burnishes a being. To me people who pray regularly have a glisten and a shine that distinguishes them, almost imperceptibly, from others. They have a calm and a centeredness that always draws me near.

RABBI ZOE KLEIN

As a spiritual practice, prayer is best judged by the kind of personalities it helps to create.

People ask me, "What makes you the way you are?" How surprised they are when I say, "I have an active prayer life."

CANTOR ELLEN DRESKIN

