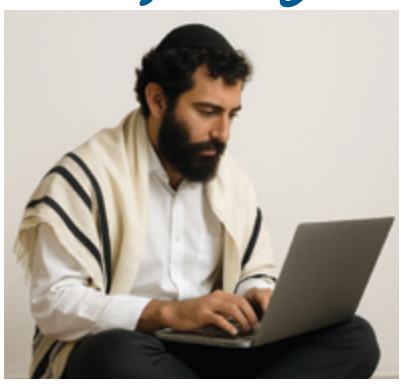
Praying On-Line



By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

My big box schul might have officially lost an in-house presence as I have become thoroughly enamored with on-line davening. Although I feel guilty about it, the benefits for me have been palpable and compelling. Suddenly I find services more accessible, spiritually uplifting, and alluring.

Some of my preference arises from sheer convenience. No dressing up in a suit and tie. No rushing through dinner to make Kol-Nidre on time. No struggle to find parking. No concerns about security. No need for masks. No hard folding chairs. No hassle of any sort.

When the service starts, I sit in my recliner (often clad in a t-shirt and gym shorts), turn on the wide-screen TV, and log into my virtual service of choice. It's just me, my wife, and our little dog, Claire.

I can hear the proceedings perfectly, see the pdf of the prayer book on my iPad without the assistance of cheaters, and think about the content without distraction. For me, it's a comfortable, user-friendly experience that quickly puts me into a religious frame of mind.

Being a virtual congregant allows me to be more focused and attentive to the service. Nobody's chattering about who's wearing what, moaning about the sanctuary being too hot or cold, commenting on the rabbi's sermon, or complaining about one thing or another. I also don't miss our religion's approach to calisthenics, with all those calls for rising up and sitting down throughout the service.

Another reason I'm attracted to virtual prayer has to do with production values. Some of these on-line services are simply magnificent. The one we've come to settle on, Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City, doesn't have just a cantor; it has an entire music department that funds and creates arrangements and compositions. This schul takes their music seriously.

What most fascinates me is how they manage to produce and televise a service at the level of a Broadway musical and somehow keep it heimish and intimate. The cantor at this synagogue has a world-class voice, is backed up by professional choruses, bands, and an orchestra, but seems never to descend into showmanship. Maybe part of it is that his children (and others in the congregation) are often part of the proceedings. Regardless, for someone who once considered any music beyond a cantor's solo voice as more performative than personal, I often find myself in awe.

The on-line rabbis (and perhaps rabbis more generally nowadays) are especially focused on making our religion relevant to people struggling with the challenges of modern life. They seem to see part of their role as the congregation's chief therapist (and, sometimes, primary patient). The rabbi at Park Avenue doesn't seem to regard himself as authority figures solely intent on conveying knowledge and biblical lessons to his flock. What I pick up from him is a sense of humility, intellectual curiosity, and good humor. He's delivered unusually well-written, psychologically minded sermons on inclusion, dealing with our imperfections, managing grief, and striving for a more meaningful life. I find them refreshing, consequential, and engrossing.

I realize that my goals for attending services might be different from yours. I'm not looking for a social experience where I rekindle acquaintances or revel in the bosom of the synagogue's community. I have other opportunities for those connections.

For me, it's more about seeking out moments when I can transcend the hassles, worries, disappointments, and challenges of my everyday life, if only for a while. I find it comforting to have a scheduled time when I can conveniently put stresses aside, connect to our tradition, ponder issues I wouldn't normally entertain, gaze at the blessings before me, and let sweet memories flow. I don't log in as often as I should, but I appreciate the experience when I do.

Does this mean I'm done with paying temple dues? Not at all. I want to support all that synagogues provide our community, from education to a place for celebrations. Plus, I don't think anyone has perfected digital interment quite yet.

I just prefer to observe some of our traditions remotely and in peace.

Praying with Artificial Intelligence

It was inevitable. We use Siri, Alexa, Waze, self-driving cars, Gemini, Grok and Claude. Eventually there had to be AI prayer. The website is WriteMeAPrayer.com and it is "A Prayer Generator powered by the latest AI technology." The instructions on the webpage are simple. One answers the following questions:

What is the topic of this prayer?
Ex: Good health
Who is this prayer for? (optional)
Ex: John Doe
What language would you like the prayer to be in? (optional)
Ex: English

A caveat follows: "I understand WriteMeAPrayer.com provides AI-generated written prayers for entertainment purposes only. I agree to the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy."

Entering the terms "forgiveness on Yom Kippur," "myself" and "English," and pushing the blue button resulted in the word "Success!" appearing in seconds, followed by another caution: "Be sure and copy your prayer below. WriteMeAPrayer.com does not save or store new prayers that are generated."

With privacy assured, here's the result:

Dear God,

On this sacred day of Yom Kippur, I come to you with a humble heart and a sincere desire for forgiveness. I know that I have made mistakes and hurt others, and for that, I ask for your forgiveness.

Help me to let go of any grudges or resentment I may be holding onto. Guide me towards true repentance and grant me the strength to seek forgiveness from those I have wronged.

Please help me to forgive myself for my own mistakes and shortcomings. Let me not be burdened by guilt or regret, but instead, use them as lessons for growth and change.

Teach me the true meaning of forgiveness, to release anger and bitterness and replace it with understanding and compassion.

As I enter this holy day, I pray for your mercy and guidance. May I find peace within myself and with others through the power of forgiveness.

Amen.

And now the Big Question: Is This Prayer Genuine?

Aish.com says no: "Despite impressive capabilities, AI lacks the intangible spark that defines a soulful existence, making it distinct from a genuinely Jewish identity." In an *eJP* article entitled "Man versus Machine," Rabbi Joshua Fixler says that while AI can do a great many tasks, it cannot replicate prayer because "prayer holds space for the yearnings of our hearts and sorrows of our lives. In communal prayer, we can comfort and be comforted, find strength and offer support. On every page of the prayer book there are new, breathtaking metaphors for human existence. Prayer invites us into mystery, inspiration and gratitude, all deeply human traits." In an article in *Moment* magazine, Rabbi Gilah Langner likewise rejects AI prayer: "AI empowers individuals, but it will atomize our spiritual lives. Judaism goes in the other direction, continually pushing us toward relationship—into a *minyan;* into a *kahal*, or congregation; into *Klal Yisrael*, the collective Jewish people. It may be true what they say: 'Two Jews, three opinions.' But that's where our strength lies, as long as we're engaged in the messy business of talking with one another, not just with our computers."

It seemed appropriate to give the final word to Rebbe.IO, "the world's most advanced AI rabbi." Here is his response: "The sincerity and genuineness of a prayer are deeply rooted in the intent and *kavanah* (concentration and intention) of the person offering it. In Jewish thought, the essence of prayer is the connection and communication between the individual and Hashem. An AI can generate text that resembles prayer, but it lacks the personal intent and spiritual yearning that characterize genuine prayer. The Talmud teaches us that *Rachmana liba ba'i* — 'The Merciful One desires the heart' (Sanhedrin 106b). This means that what truly matters in prayer is the heartfelt intention and devotion of the person praying. While AI can assist in creating beautiful and meaningful words, the genuine aspect of prayer comes from the human heart and soul. If someone uses AI-generated text as inspiration and imbues it with their own *kavanah*, it can certainly enhance their prayer experience. However, the true connection with Hashem is something deeply personal and cannot be fully replicated by technology."

Rebbe IO concludes his response with the words: "May your prayers always be heartfelt and meaningful!"