

“A Prayer Must Both Mean, and Be.”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

When asked what one of his pictures meant, Picasso replied, “What does a tree mean?” The poetic counterpart of that answer comes from Archibald MacLeish, “A poem should not mean, but be.”

Sometimes intellectual exploration can block direct experience. Surely poems and paintings have meanings. Yet the insistent search for meaning at times destroys the experience of looking or listening. So it is with prayer. Many people are unfamiliar with the meaning of Jewish prayers, and the translation is not always helpful. But even for those who understand the Hebrew, when praying we do not necessarily concentrate on interpretation but on the experience of prayer. Prayer offers a conduit to the heart’s yearning. Study is an intellectual exercise; worship is about the motion of the soul.

The Talmud records a debate: When praying, should one concentrate on Earth or Heaven? The issue is resolved by teaching that one who prays directs his eyes below and his heart above. Note that the Talmud does not say it depends upon what the content might be. The posture of prayer is central.

There is meaning in prayer, but a prayer is not its meaning. A prayer is the gateway to experience a relationship; a prayer is a poem, a dirge, a cry, an exclamation, a meditation, a song. A prayer must both mean, and be.