

## Why 'Share A Prayer'



### When You Already Have Access to the Real Thing?

#### Come back to *T'fillah!* Come Back Home!

Have a Facebook page, do you? Then you may be aware that Facebook now offers a new feature, one of growing popularity: the prayer tool.

No, the Facebook 'prayer tool' is neither digital *siddur* nor onLine *machzor*. What it is, is a feature that allows users to post and respond to prayer requests. I kid you not!

Users generate a post with their very own prayer request = research shows that prayers for health, upcoming job interviews, and other personal challenges are most common - to which other users may reply by clicking either an "I prayed" tab or the ubiquitous "like." (The Facebook equivalent of - well, Amen?)

Users - Facebook congregants? - may also comment and send messages directly to other congregants - uh, users - in their group. The Facebook version of *yasher koach* or *r'fuah sh'leimah*, I suppose.

It's not clear whether users in one Facebook prayer group may cross boundaries and share prayers with users in another Facebook group. But if shuls can merge, and they do, I suppose that, in time, the coders at Facebook will figure out a way for Facebook users of different groups to do so as well.

Finally, not unimportantly, users may also choose to be notified with a reminder to pray again at a specific time. (Wait 'til Marcel Buchsbaum hears about that!)

Cool, don't you think?



With so many users already on Facebook - the company claims close to three billion monthly active users - it should come as no surprise that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg long saw faith communities as an opportunity to further the company's stated mission to "connect the world."

In fact, at Facebook's 2017 'Communities Summit,' Facebook app head Fidji Simo noted that, "One of the biggest communities using Facebook products to connect, are people of faith." And in a manifesto that Zuckerberg presented at that summit, he pointedly cited churches and worshippers as a community by way of which to expand the ever-growing media conglomerate.

With the onslaught of Covid-19 and the increasing closure of churches, synagogues and mosques, social media sites became even more important to faith communities - and of special interest to Facebook.

"When I looked at the data of what was taking off during the pandemic, we were seeing massive growth in the spiritual category," Simo said. The value of "connecting the world" of the Facebook faithful was not lost on company's leadership; indeed, it took on a new urgency.

But what are Facebook users really sharing with each other? More importantly, by what medium is the Facebook user conveying his or her prayer request?

I suppose 'tis not for this writer to question the value of a prayer just because of its packaging. Why should a prayer packaged digitally be viewed as of lesser substance than a hand-written *kvitel* inserted in the Western Wall? For that matter, in today's electronic age, kevarim.com accepts *kvitelach* by eMail and text message. Is a Facebook prayer any less meaningful than a digital *kvitel*? Any different than a *t'fillah* uttered in the sanctuary of a *shul*?

But it's not just the wrapping of the prayer; it's also its conveyance: both the vehicle, and the venue by which the prayer is being transmitted. For those who take prayers and houses of worship seriously, this is no laughing matter; the question is an important one.



*T'fillah* - inadequately translated as 'prayer' - means so much more than that which the English word 'prayer' conveys. Having dealt (in my May 2020 Newsletter submission) with the etymology of the word *t'fillah* and what it connotes, I draw your attention to the larger, more meaningful goal of *t'fillah* and its potential impact.

If *t'fillah* it is no more than a shopping list of wants and needs, even spiritual ones, than we are shortchanging ourselves. *T'fillah* has the potential to be far more than just the perfunctory recitation of words. If we allow it, *t'fillah* can be a significant, even revelatory encounter with both the Almighty but no less - perhaps even first - ourselves; a meaningful engagement that changes the precant him or herself. For this *ba'al t'fillah*, a prayer experience that is not introspective, even cathartic, is not as fulfilling as I know it can be.

Particularly during the *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Awe, when our liturgy is one of intense emotion, rich in dramatic and moving imagery, filled with themes of hopefulness and resolve, penitence and forgiveness, who could be satisfied with the superficial, if not downright comical, 'I prayed' or 'like' that Facebook offers?



Truth be told, if you've read thus far, I very much doubt that you are a Facebook prayer user. You know, likely better than I, that for its shareholders, Facebook is not just first and foremost - but only - a business. That it may provide a service to its almost three billion users, may be all well and good, as long

as its users know what it's costing them by way of loss of privacy and susceptibility to unwanted advertising. But a venue for *t'fillah*?

Facebook's Terms of Use makes clear that the company utilizes all that users share on its platforms for the purpose of personalized ad targeting. Author, speaker, entrepreneur, and 'pastor' Nona Jones, Facebook's head of 'faith partnerships,' candidly told Reuters that, as with other content, prayer posts are used to personalize ads on Facebook. Another spokesperson said that the data could feed into how Facebook's machine learning systems decide which ads to show users.

Clearly, then, Facebook has found a new way to capitalize on the thoughts, 'prayers' - and data - of its prayer users. Duncan Collum, a professor of English and journalism at Kentucky State University, commenting specifically on Facebook's 'prayer' feature, hit it on the head when he said, "Facebook doesn't exist to facilitate our spiritual lives or our sense of community. It exists to sell our information and allow advertisers to target us."

So while Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has repeatedly said that Facebook's mission is to "connect the world," and other company spokesmen have said that the prayer feature is part of an ongoing effort to support faith communities, the notion that in offering its 'prayer tool' Facebook is not acting out of purely selfless motivation and that it wants more user engagement with the platform is - well, just ask the Winklevoss twins, Cameron and Tyler.



So, dear congregant, connect on Facebook all that you like, but engage in *t'fillah* - with me. Involve yourself in *t'fillah* on a 'platform' that is not algorithm-based or data-driven, but rooted in historical tradition; not just this writer's tradition, not just your tradition, but that to which all of Jewry are heirs, a several millennia-old tradition.

Open your heart and mind to the beauty of our liturgy. Allow the chants of our *t'fillot* to speak to you, no less than that you speak them. Clicking a 'prayer' button or tapping a 'like' icon is easy - and meaningless. *T'fillah* - takes work.

Let's work together by joining our voices in *t'fillah* together; not in a virtual community, but in a real, authentic community - our shul. Dear congregant, come back to *shul*; our *shul*.

Wishing you and yours a *Shana Tovah uM'tukah! K'tivah vaChatima Tovah!*

Cantor Moshe Weiss