

Lord's Prayer at AA Meetings

by Pelsoni Almoni

This article is reprinted with permission from the *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Fall, 1987. Pelsoni Almoni was the anonymous pen name of a rabbi/alcoholic member of JACS now deceased, zt"l. May his memory be for a blessing.

I was the rabbi who posed the question to Rabbi Walter Jacob and the Responsa Committee on the problem of a Jew's reciting The Lord's Prayer at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (*Journal of Reform Judasim*, Spring 1987).

The response of the committee was that the profound Christian associations of this prayer -- particularly because it was prescribed by the founder of that faith -- "makes its use unacceptable to Jews. It would, therefore, be wrong for Jews to recite it even in a non-religious setting such as Alcoholics Anonymous." Rabbi Jacob then advises: "As it is recited at the conclusion of the meeting, there is really no reason to participate. One can stand in silence, and I am sure that this would be respected and understood."

Of course, it would be respected and understood by members of the group. Members of AA are accepting people. That was not the issue for me then. My concern was my own feeling of guilt during my early days in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Meetings were usually in church basements. That was strange for me and left me feeling uncomfortable. Then, when the meetings concluded with the group's holding hands and reciting The Lord's Prayer, I just knew I did not belong there. But I was wrong.

Now that I have been in the program of recovery a few years, I doubt whether I would even ask the question. I am comfortable with Alcoholics Anonymous and I recite that prayer. It is helpful for my own program of recovery.

One could easily point out Jewish parallels to The Lord's Prayer in older Jewish sources. This is done well by Beryl Cohon in his "Jacob's Well," by Samuel Sandmel, and others. Analogies to the Kaddish and to benedictions in the Shemoney Esreh are obvious. So why did I even ask the question in the first place? I should have heeded the Yiddish aphorism, "Venn Mann Frekt, Es Iss Schoen Traif -- When one [has to] ask, it is already not kosher." Also, whenever one honestly asks a question, one should be prepared for a possible negative answer. So why did I even ask the question? It was, I believe, an expression of my own denial and my personal resistance to recovery.

One of the symptoms of alcoholism is denial. This is a disease that tells the alcoholic that he/she does not have it. Our Jewish folks tradition plays into this denial. After all, is not "Shiker a goy -- The drunkard a Gentile?" And do we Jews not learn to drink only on sacred occasions, so we learn discipline in the use of alcohol?

Immanuel Kant wrote in 1798 that Jews do not get drunk because they "are exposed through their eccentricity and alleged chosenness to relax in their self-control." We came to believe these myths. So, through denial afflicts all alcoholics, it afflicts us with a particular insidiousness.

The Responsa Committee gave its answer based on its best judgment and scholarship. This is to be respected. But in honesty, it was not really my concern then. I really was seeking an excuse not to go to meetings. But the committee could not have known this.

My personal experience since then in the AA's Twelve-Step Program is to enter fully and without intellectual reservations. Hence, I say The Lord's Prayer and I am comfortable doing so. The support of the group has been so necessary for me that I will not place now any obstacles in the way of my full participation. This is a matter of trust. Others may prefer to stand silently. I do not.

Also, as I recite this prayer in the context of these meetings, I find that its words express values that have deep personal meaning for my own spirituality. Whether this is synchronization with another faith and a dilution of my Judaism, I do not know. I But I do know that it is necessary for my own recovery. Alcoholism is a disease that could be fatal for me. It is pikuach nefesh. Like medicine that comes from traife sources, it may be permissible to use it to preserve my life.

Now that I have been in the AA program for several years, I am comfortable with this solution. But early on, I felt fragile and such a responsum was not helpful. So I urge Jews and others who are entering these proven self-help programs for their own recovery to suspect criticism until they have tried the program for a while.

Denial and early resistance to recovery afflicts all alcoholics. But we Jews seem to come by it with a vengeance. Whatever the cause of alcoholism, I have learned that it is "an equal-opportunity disease."

This responsum may have been based on sound halachic scholarship. But I hope that the Responsa Committee will reconsider it in the light of what may be more helpful to the recovering alcoholic who is Jewish.