

Chapter Eight

Enhancing the Prayer Experience

“Imagination, I believe, is an important component of faith. . . . It is only if we are willing to imagine that we can hear, see, and feel God’s presence. . . . The deepest truths so far transcend our own limitedness that only the generosity of mind and spirit called imagination can allow us to go beyond the narrowness of self and embrace the reality of God, God’s universe, and God’s Torah.”

—Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, Jewish Theological Seminary



In chapter four we sampled some guided imagery exercises dealing with themes of the Eternal Book, the Bible. The book most frequently used by religious Jews, after the Bible, is the siddur. The siddur is a rich anthology of the longings of the Jewish heart over many centuries.

One way to use imagery and visualization in enhancing the prayer experience is to have participants find a relaxing position, listen to some soft, appropriate music, and read the words of some of the beautiful prayers of the siddur (the daily and Shabbat prayer book), or of the maḥzor (the prayer book for festivals and the high holy days).

We will look at a number of parts of various prayer services to see how guided imagery exercises can introduce these prayers and can intensify the prayer experience by allowing participants to reach higher levels of spiritual elevation.

Shabbat Evening—L’cha Dodi

One of the most exquisite prayers of the Friday night service is L’cha Dodi, written by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabez in the sacred city of Safed, Eretz Yisrael, during the sixteenth century. Kabbalists would go out into the fields with the setting of the sun, and wait for the arrival of the Shabbat bride in their mind’s eye. The image of Shabbat as a bride is a popular one. The Shabbat bride is considered to be married to the people of Israel. In Talmudic legend, each day of the week had a partner, except Shabbat. So God gave the Shabbat to the people of Israel as her partner.

Find a comfortable position, take some deep breaths, and let a wave of serenity wash over you, releasing all your tension and tightness. Find your body preparing for Shabbat with a sense of renewal and refreshment. Your extra soul, a gift given to every Jew on Shabbat, is bringing you invigoration and enlightenment. See how good it feels. . . .

Picture yourself in the sixteenth century, in the holy, mystical city of Safed, along with Rabbi Yosef Karo, Rabbi Shlomo Alkabez, and other mystical scholars, washing and purifying their heart, soul and body, for the coming of Shabbat.

Feel yourself getting ready for a special guest in your home. Shabbat, a lovely bride bedecked all in white, with flowing lace and a long train of silk, begins to appear in the distance. You can see the outlines of her body adorned with special garments, pure and white as clean snow, gently gliding toward your group of worshippers. . . . Watch her coming closer and closer. . . .

As the Shabbat bride gets closer and the red sun begins to set deeper and deeper in the brilliant orange sky behind, everyone feels the special aura which Shabbat brings into the community. All feel pure and clean, refreshed and relaxed, free of cares and worries, thinking only of the splendor of the next twenty-six hours of peacefulness and harmony. . . .

The children have gathered around the dinner table, waiting for their parents to return from the fields. The candles are glowing in the house, bringing Shabbat light and Shabbat joy. The Kiddush cup is brim full, and the special Shabbat foods are warming on the stove. Everyone runs to the window to get a glimpse of the Shabbat bride in the distance, even as the day becomes darker and darker. . . .

In the fields, the parents begin to see the outline of the Shabbat queen more and more clearly, as excitement rises to a feverish pitch. . . . Shabbat is coming. . . . Shabbat is coming. . . . Even God rejoices in the highest heavens, as the Blessed Holy One watches its creatures below rejoicing with the onset of Shabbat. All the flowers and trees in the field jump with dance and song, as the Shabbat bride glides by them, entering the town. . . .

With the coming of the Shabbat bride, Safed's residents break into song: Come in peace, crown of beauty and joy, we greet you with joy and song. Come to join God's chosen people, who remember and observe the special Shabbat day. Welcome, O Shabbat Bride, we greet the countenance of our beloved Shabbat!

Sh'ma Yisrael

You may want to utilize one of the relaxation exercises in chapter three, to bring about a complete and deep sense of calm and openness to help participants prepare for this exercise. Since the Sh'ma is the central liturgical affirmation of Judaism, it deserves more time and attention than other prayers. When the group is in a state of relaxation, we may begin.