

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS

HOW PRAYER WORKS

Just like you need to know more than how to turn on a computer to derive its maximum benefit, prayer also requires an understanding of what makes it work in order to benefit from its unlimited potential.

Praying to God to alleviate a difficult situation presents a bit of a paradox. There are two fundamental concepts of Jewish thought that would make it seem that prayer should not be able to accomplish such a task. One concept is that God causes everything, whether it appears to us to be good, bad or somewhere in between. He sends the illness from which we pray to be cured. He sends the enemies from whom we pray to be saved. If He didn't want us to suffer these difficulties, it would seem that He wouldn't send them in the first place.

The second basic concept is that everything God does is, at its root, good. We believe that God is perfect and complete goodness, and that when we suffer, it is for some greater purpose in this world or in the spiritual world. Sometimes you see the good with your own eyes: You break up with someone you love, but marry someone so much better for you. You spend a week sick in bed, but discover how much you're loved and needed. Often, however, we don't perceive the good, and can only derive comfort from the knowledge that, in the Divine, omniscient view of things, the good is there.

This raises some questions: Why would God change a situation in response to our prayers if in His judgment, the situation was good? Why would we even be allowed to ask Him to do so?

The answer to these questions is a fascinating look at how prayer actually operates in the material and the spiritual worlds. Rabbi Joseph Albo, a great mystic and philosopher, examined the question of how prayer works to change a Heavenly decree. He explained that it does not change the decree; it changes the object of the decree. The person to whom God has sent poverty or illness or some other difficulty can, by praying, change his spiritual iden-

tity to the point where the necessity of enduring the difficulty has been eliminated.

Jane the Spiritual Underachiever might require a frightening bout of pneumonia to awaken her to the need for a life of deeper meaning. But if now, after the fourth antibiotic has failed, she is motivated to reach out to God and forge a relationship, she is no longer *Jane the Spiritual Underachiever*. She is now *Jane the Exalted*, and the pneumonia has no further purpose. The fifth antibiotic works.

The words of prayer themselves can be a powerful catalyst for this change. It may seem that when we pray, we are sending an Earth-to-Heaven communication. But in fact, the words of our Hebrew liturgy possess an intense spiritual power that flows from Heaven to Earth. The prayers we recite were composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, the holiest and most learned men of the times of the Second Temple. They were guided by *Ruach Hakodesh*, Divine inspiration, to choose words that would possess the ability to uplift those who recited them with sincerity. These words are the active ingredient in the spiritual medicine that is prayer. (That's why, even though all prayers are understood and accepted, it is always worthwhile to master the standard Hebrew liturgy.)

When a person faces suffering and challenge, he prays. But his prayer does not change God's mind. It changes who the person is, and that changes everything.

Numbers 12:13 So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "O God, pray heal her!" (TNK)

Adapted from [Praying With Fire](#) (ArtScroll) by Rabbi Heshy Kleinman