

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS

Getting Your Prayers Answered

Understanding why and how prayer works. A Jewish perspective.

Have you ever had a prayer answered? Stop for a moment and consider the implications.

You live in a small town in the Midwest. There is an extremely large and unsightly pothole in front of your house. For the last four months the local municipality has ignored your persistent requests to have it fixed. Finally, in an act of frustration, you call the White House and ask for the president. (Hey, it's worth a try.)

To your utter amazement, the president himself gets on the phone. You quickly explain your problem. The president listens for a minute, takes down your address, and then hangs up. You don't really expect anything to be done about it.

The next morning you look out your window and, lo and behold, an army corps of engineers is busy at work fixing your road. The president of the United States took your request seriously and sent in the troops to fix the pothole.

This is what it means to get your prayer answered.

Now, we all know this isn't happening to a regular Joe. But who is the one person who can always get through to the president?

His child, of course.

God is our Father and we are His child. Just as a parent fulfills a child's request, so, too, God answers our prayers. But in order to have God answer your prayer, you need to know He is willing and able to do so. And you have to be honest, sincere and responsible about what you pray for, as King David wrote, "God is close to all those who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him sincerely" (Psalms 145:18). Prayer requires accessing your inner core and being real with God. Where are you, and what do you really want? It means dropping all pretenses and communicating your genuine thoughts and needs, in the reality of God's presence.

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Why Do We Need To Pray?

God already knows our needs. He certainly does not need us to remind Him of them. So why do we need to pray? Why doesn't God just give us what we need without our having to ask?

God does not need our prayers – we do. Prayer is a reflection of our desires and an extension of our power of free choice. It helps us refine and affirm what it is we want out of life. If a billionaire father handed his child unlimited cash on a silver platter, the child would grow up terribly spoiled and irresponsible. Similarly, if God gave us everything automatically, we would never be forced to work out what it is we really want in life. Life would be comfortable, but we would remain shallow and undeveloped. It is through the challenges we face and the efforts we make as a result of those challenges that we learn to appreciate the value of what we want.

God has our best interests at heart. He wants us to earn our growth because that is how we retain our independence and become real about what it is we want to accomplish.

Five Aspects to Being Real with Prayer

#1: Get Clear on Your Bottom Line: Is What You Want Good for You?

To get our prayers answered, we have to know that what we seek is in our best interests. Will the fulfillment of this request bring us closer to God or push us further away? We can only expect God to answer our prayer if its attainment will bring us closer to reality, not escapism.

When I was eight years old, the World's Fair came to New York. My entire class decided to play hooky one day and go to the World's Fair. But there was one condition: Everyone had to bring a dollar. If you did not have a dollar, you could not come.

When I was a child the only way I could get a dollar from my father was to learn a chapter of Mishnah by heart. But there was no way I could memorize a whole chapter on such short notice. So I figured I might as well go to school that day. I would be the only one there – a hero!

I started walking to school when it suddenly occurred to me: Keep your eyes on the pavement, Noah, maybe you'll find a dollar!

I started looking. One block. No dollar. Two blocks. No dollar. I started to pray, "God, a dollar bill... You have them lying around the street sometimes. Just this one time, let me find a dollar bill."

Two more blocks, no dollar. I thought maybe God wants something from me. So I started making all kinds of promises. "Hashem, I'll take out the garbage. And I won't fight with my sister."

Still no dollar.

I upped the ante. "God, if You give me a dollar, I'll learn a chapter of Mishnah and I *won't* take the dollar from my father. You can trust me. It's a loan. Okay?"

No dollar.

Finally, I rounded the corner and the school was in sight. It was time to pull out all the stops. "God, give me one dollar, and I'll never do anything wrong again for the rest of my life!"

And then I caught myself. "Noah, who are you kidding? If you find the dollar, you're going to play hooky!"

We cannot expect God to give us a dollar so that we can do the wrong thing. To avoid this mistake, we need to do the work of clarifying our desires. We need to ask ourselves: Why do we want this? Does the Almighty want us to have this? God's answer – whether yes or no – always tells us something important about ourselves or will likely give us insight into the validity of what we are seeking.

Before you ask, make sure what you are praying for is good for you.

#2: Be Responsible, Make an Effort

Prayer is not an escape from personal effort and responsibility. It is a tool to help us refine our understanding of what we want and to realize that God is the true source of all that we accomplish.

Prayer focuses us on reality. If we are serious about what we are praying for, then we first need to be responsible and put in our best efforts to make it happen. Prayer is not a wish; it is predicated on working hard and taking responsibility.

Ask yourself: Do I really want to accomplish this? Am I willing to take responsibility to do what I can to attain it? How much am I prepared to sacrifice for it?

#3: Expect the Good

Being real about prayer means we realize we are praying to our Father in Heaven Who wants only our good and has the power to do anything. Therefore, we should anticipate that God wants to help us. Anything we ask for is infinitesimally less than what God has already given to us.

If we do not expect that God will answer our prayer, God will not invade our space and shock us with success. He wants us to earn the realization that He is our Father in Heaven and that we can always count on Him.

By turning our prayer down, God is telling us that we have a problem that needs addressing; we need to realign.

To illustrate, imagine a 22-year-old driving through Manhattan during rush hour in the middle of July. Red lights, gridlock, honking, summer heat... *aggravation*.

If his father was in charge of all the traffic lights in New York City and was able to track his location at any given time, he'd have it made. His father would arrange one green light after another, all the way across town!

The Almighty can arrange it for him. He created the universe. Traffic in Manhattan is not overly taxing for Him.

So here goes our driver. Green light, green light, green light, green light. He says to himself, *this is too good to be true. I don't deserve this.*

Red light.

If you don't anticipate God's help, then you have lost sight of God as your Father. So, God breaks the flow in order to realign your focus.

Focus on the fact that the Almighty wants everything to be good for you. When you do that, He'll move mountains to answer a prayer that is good for you.

#4: Be Shocked if You Don't Get It

Nothing God does is an accident. If things do not go smoothly for you, your first reaction should be one of shock. "What's going on? Why is God doing this? What message does He want me to get?"¹

An uncle wrote letters to his nephew at college to find out how he was doing and keep up the relationship. After six months and numerous letters, the nephew hadn't written back once.

The next time, the uncle wrote his standard letter, but this time, he added a P.S.: "I've enclosed a hundred-dollar check for you." Then he deliberately mailed the letter without the check.

The nephew received the letter and could not find the check. As expected, the uncle immediately got a letter in return: "College is great... I like my dorm room... I'm taking physics. By the way, you forgot to enclose the check. Love, your favorite nephew."

The Almighty knows how to get our attention. When we forget that He loves us, He sends a red light to refocus us.

But there's one big difference between the uncle and God: God is not hurt when we ignore Him. We are. God has no needs and doesn't need a relationship with us. It is we who need a relationship with Him. Our greatest pleasure is being in touch with God. That's why He arranges small mishaps to get our attention. It is all for our own benefit.

#5: Listen to God's Lessons

If you are serious about a relationship with God, then you understand that God is always teaching you, even when He does not answer your prayer in the affirmative.

When life is suddenly full of inconveniences, stop and ask: *Why is He trying to get my attention?* In some ways this is the most demanding aspect, because it requires us to hold onto the perception that God is our Father in Heaven and that everything He does is for our good, even when we are feeling pain. Saying with clarity and conviction, "*Gam zu l'tovah*, this too is for the good," with no resentment and bitterness, demonstrates the deepest realization that God is our loving Father.

If we are unable to say "*Gam zu l'tovah*" with a full heart, then it is almost impossible for us to properly hear what God is saying to us. God is very articulate, but if we lose sight of the fact that He is our Father in Heaven, then our relationship is off kilter and any lesson we derive will necessarily be distorted. With the awareness that Hashem loves us, we can take stock of this area of our life and try to understand what the Almighty is telling us.

In Summary

Prayer takes real work. It requires getting into your bones that the Almighty is your Father in Heaven Who loves you.

Know what you want and why you want it, and ensure that what you are seeking is in fact good for you. Take responsibility and put in your effort. Expect the good and be shocked if things do not go smoothly. Ask yourself, why is the Almighty trying to get my attention? And lastly, strive to understand the lesson the Almighty is sending you. Ask yourself: What is He teaching me?

Applying these tools to the daily prayers will transform your relationship with God.

Adapted from [Wisdom for Living](#): Rabbi Noah Weinberg on the parasha. [Click here to order](#).

1. The Gemara (*Berachos* 34a) explains that the structure of Shemoneh Esrei mirrors a servant's interaction with his master. The servant first praises the master, then asks the master for what he needs, and finally thanks the master for fulfilling his requests. (Maharsha ad loc.) The implication is that immediately after asking God for our needs, we are so confident that they are "in the bag," we can already thank Him for fulfilling them.