

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



Rabbi, Pray For Me

Why are so many Jews uncomfortable with heartfelt prayer?

by [Rabbi Moshe Fine](#)

She was sitting on the edge of her bed, waiting to be wheeled into surgery. She looked quite anxious. The nurse paged me to come as the on-call chaplain because the patient “wanted prayer” before her operation.

“Thank you so much for coming.”

“You are welcome. What is making you so nervous?”

“Well... it isn’t supposed to be such a complicated procedure, but they asked me if I had a Living Will and gave me some paperwork to fill out. Now I am thinking of the worst, and I have three young children at home.”

“I am so sorry. Having surgery can be very frightening and contemplating death doesn’t make it easy.”

“That’s exactly it. Could you say a prayer for me?”

“Of course. What would you like to pray for?”

“That I get home safely to my family.”

“Please God, listen to the prayers of Mrs. A. Please grant her courage and let her know that you are with her at this time. Please give guidance to her medical team to mend her heart. Please restore her to health

so that she may quickly and speedily return to her family, so that she may raise her children to follow in Your ways, and so that she may continue to enjoy and acknowledge all of the blessings that You have given her.”

“Thank you so much. I am feeling a little more relaxed now.”

As an institutional chaplain at a major medical center, serving critically ill patients, I am regularly called to the bedside of a patient with the request, “the patient wants prayer now” or “the patient wants prayer before surgery.” Most frequently, these requests come from my non-Jewish patients, who are eager to be led in prayer. From the most fundamentalist Christian to devout or even non-practicing Catholics, these patients are very willing to accept the supplication of a rabbi on their behalf. Kind of like a prescription for pain-killers or a curative pill, these patients see prayer as integral element of their course of treatment.

Interestingly, my non-observant Jewish patients seem much less comfortable talking about God. Prayer seems foreign to them, speaking to God unfamiliar.

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To a certain extent, I understand this feeling of unease. Even though I am a rabbi, I grew up in a secular home. Prayer within the formula set by our rabbis was odd enough on a rare Friday night or on the High Holidays. Extemporaneous prayer would have been more odd. Talking to God in my own voice was not something I grew up doing, let alone formulating something to say on someone else’s behalf or accepting a personal prayer from another.

How ironic that we Jews, who brought an understanding of God into the world, feel so awkward talking to God and praying in our own words, while non-Jews converse with God with ease. Prayer should not be uncomfortable for us.

Indeed, there is a mitzvah, “When you go to war in your land against an adversary that oppresses you, you shall sound the trumpets and you will be remembered before H’ your God and you will be delivered from your enemies” Numbers 10:9. Based on this verse, our rabbis understand that just as when we are faced with war, we are commanded to call out to God with trumpet or shofar blasts, so too the community must fast and call out to God whenever calamity strikes it. And just as it is incumbent on the community to collectively cry out to God in times of need, so too, an individual is obliged to call out to God in times of personal need. This mitzvah is in addition to any obligation of set prayer.

Calling out to God in times of need acknowledges that ultimately, He is in control of everything and that what is happening to us is not occurring by mere chance. In this way, we demonstrate our belief that not only does the world in general have purpose, but so too our lives. Individually, we have purpose as well. Recognizing this, we arouse our hearts to realign our lives.

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The gates of heaven are open to everyone; a person does not need a rabbi or anyone else praying for them. On the contrary, God counts our tears, so the words of a person in need are potentially much more powerful than any words someone else could offer. Most important are heartfelt and sincere words. They are what matter, whether a person is praying for themselves or for another.

When articulating a prayer, it is best to choose our words carefully; being specific is important. Yet, at the same time, through our prayers we are ultimately striving to connect to God and to have the clarity that God is always with us. Therefore, in my prayers, I always seek first a heightened consciousness of God's presence before proceeding to enumerate whatever the needs are of the moment.

When we pray for ourselves, we are expressing gratitude for our life and our desire to maximize it. When we pray for others we are acknowledging our love for our fellow human beings and recognizing the Divine image imprinted on them. As a result, we are brought into closer in relationship with those for whom we pray, and we are drawn closer to God.

Prayer is thus a curative act and it makes sense that it is part of our prescription for healing. When we pray, we do not change God, but we do change ourselves. In doing so, we affect an actual spiritual and physical change in the situation before us. In the end, our prayers may or may not result in the healing we seek. Ultimately, everything is up to God. We are limited in our ability to understand why things happen as they do. Still, with our prayers from our hearts in our own words, we are improved, the world is enhanced (even if ever-so-slightly), and we are drawn closer to the object of our prayer, to God, and to the purpose of our own existence.

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