

# PRAYING with *Fire*

## PRAYER POINTS



### Heavenly Prayer

by Rabbi Yaakov Salomon

*The unique advantages of praying 38,000 feet above the ground.*

23K

It's a window seat. It's my seat. Flight 012; El Al. The local time must be around 7 or 8 or 9 A.M. and, according to the map on my screen, we are somewhere between Halifax and Lisbon, I guess. It doesn't really matter.

I have just completed my morning prayers. Nothing unusual about that. It's something I've done every day for the past...er...many years. Of course, I'm usually 38,000 feet closer to the ground and in a synagogue when I pray, but the words are very much the same.

I like prayer and I'll tell you why.

First of all, there's something special about speaking to God. It's a chance to check-in with my manufacturer and get a sense of what, if any, repairs are necessary. Maybe all I need is an oil change or a new filter or a lube. Periodically a major tune-up is indicated. So, it's good to stop in and open the hood.

Second, life today, as you know, is incredibly hectic. I needn't explain why. And prayer time is a preset

regimen that allows for needed breaks from whatever it is we are engaged in. What a statement it is when we choose to begin and end our daily activities with a service of the heart and also find time smack in the middle of our day to do the same.

Third, I enjoy the synagogue. I take pleasure in the camaraderie and unity in praying with a *minyan*, a quorum of ten. My occasional visit to the pulpit to lead the service is a little bonus.

## **Keeping one's prayers fresh and evocative, given the sheer frequency of this most holy pursuit, is a constant challenge.**

I wish it weren't so, but frankly, prayer is not always invigorating. It can become stale and hackneyed - bereft of meaning or purpose. In fact, it often does. Keeping one's prayers fresh and evocative, given the sheer frequency of this most holy pursuit, is a constant challenge faced by every man, woman, and child. There are no easy solutions.

But prayer on a 747, presents a whole array of different challenges. Remembering to put your *siddur*, prayer book, in your carry-on, choosing the appropriate time and space to pray, when, whether, and how to stand, and (for men) donning the *talis* and *tefillin* while crouched under an overhead bin are all complications and potential impediments to a meaningful and dynamic prayer experience. And depending on who your seat mate happens to be, you may have a little explaining to do when you're done.

But, like nearly everything in life, even these clouds of hardships in prayer, contain silver linings.

As I return my *siddur* to the seat-pocket in front of me, I reflect on the prayers, just completed. And to my utter surprise, I am left with a good feeling. Despite the aforementioned inconveniences, a strange -- almost elevated mood has wafted over me.

"Where did it come from?" I wonder.

Well, to begin with, Plane Prayer (PP) has two huge advantages over Synagogue Prayer (SP) -- you can't come late and you can't leave early. How often are we seen huffing and puffing, even when praying at home, trying to catch the runaway *Shacharit* [morning prayer] train or ducking out early to catch the runaway commuter train. With no fixed starting time and certainly nowhere to go when you're finished, PP affords you the rare opportunity to actually pray at any pace you like.

An added bonus to this most unusual experience is that you are not forced to "keep up" with the rest of the congregants or the service leader. If you want to spend more time on a particular section, such as the *Sh'ma* or the silent *Amida* one says standing, you are free to do so.

And so, I did.

I began by focusing some extra few moments on the oft attention-starved 15 blessings that open the Morning Service. Our Sages teach that as one experiences the phenomena of the new day, he should bless God for providing them.

One example occurred when I came to blessing #9 -- *Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, Who spreads out the earth upon the waters*. Had I ever stopped to contemplate an appreciation for God's having formed a hard crust over the planet's interior -- made up of water, gasses, and molten metals? Ordinarily, my eyes are still sealed shut and my lips are on cruise control until 20 - 30% of the service has passed.

Who doesn't take walking on a firm surface for granted? And who could have predicted that my gratitude for this newfound pleasure would multiply just 32 hours later, when I "survived" a 7-second earthquake in Jerusalem (really)??

Even before the blessings, I usually endow a full 25 seconds or so of SP to the holy song, *Adon Olam*. This short masterpiece, written over 900 years ago, succinctly proclaims God's attributes of being timeless, infinite, and omnipotent. Today, however, during PP, I noticed that the author also included in the same song, the description, "*He is my God, my living Redeemer...He is my banner...*"

I closed my eyes for just a moment and marinated in the glow that an Omnipotent Creator is also *MY* God, *MY* Redeemer, and *MY* banner. I loved the feeling of having a real and Personal God; not easily discerned when driving 100 miles per hour during home or SP.

Later, I let the engine idle while traveling through the *Baruch She'Amar* prayer. Commentators record an ancient tradition that this prayer was transcribed by the Men of the Great Assembly 2400 years ago from a script that actually fell from heaven!

And yet...usually...unfortunately...it hardly rates a reflection of any substance or even a second glance, I dare say. Today, however, I chanced upon the phrase therein that extols God, *Who Constantly Creates*. Today, it gave me pause. Creation was not limited to a one time Big Bang-like happening. No. God didn't just finish his project and go on vacation. Creation is ongoing...current...never-ending. And so is God's direction, guidance, and love. Something to remember.

Now basking in the luxury of unhurried PP, I took a moment to consciously peer out my window. Usually, during home or SP, this activity is keenly discouraged; probably because the outside scenery on land would likely serve only as a distraction, not an enhancement of the prayer.

But today I wasn't drifting off; on the contrary. I was saying the verses:

*It is You alone, Hashem, You have made the heaven, the most exalted heaven, and all their legions, the earth and everything upon it, the seas and everything in them, and You give them all life...*

Excitedly, I gazed out onto the horizon. The prophet was right. Having never flown in an airplane, he depicted, nonetheless, the magnificence of the celestial bodies, the expanse of the universe, the

splendor of creation. I breathed deeply. I marveled at the commanding sunlight bouncing off the plane's fuselage, I winced at the robust wind currents that shook our craft, and I felt...oh...so small. Literally and figuratively, my prayers were carrying me to new heights.

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I don't think praying 7 miles higher than sea level really means the supplication is actually *closer* to God, but somehow, I *felt* closer. Unperturbed by fellow congregants, crying babies, or telephones, unaffected by the boundaries of time, and impervious to all the usual distractions, I sat in my cabin of tranquility -- just me, God, and my prayer book. It was very special.

The illuminated seat belt sign in front of me meant the *Amida* would be rendered a virtual oxymoron (I said it in my seat), but nothing could disturb this voyage of virtue. I just took my sweet time, reflecting on nearly every word; words that I had uttered tens of thousands of times but never really said -- or understood properly.

And then I made a remarkable discovery. The word that is said more than any other, in the entire *Amida* is not *Blessed*, or *Peace* or *King* or even *God*. It is the word "You." 33 times we refer to God as "You." We speak to God. And we speak with great awe and reverence. And often, in the third person. But more often, we speak to God directly. We speak in the second person. We say, "You! "

Kings, queens, great Rabbis, statesmen, even parents are often referred to in the third person. It is a sign of ultimate respect. But the composers of our holy prayers, the Men of the Great Assembly -- many of them bonafide, indisputable prophets -- fashioned our most devout prayers in terminology that tells us to *converse* with God, freely, directly, comfortably, almost...informally. It is communication without hindrance, impediment, or veneer. Incredible.

Now inspired by the comforting thought that we are encouraged to see God as a being we can easily relate to, I was reminded of a startling insight I once heard. One of the great mysteries of religious observance is the manner in which so many Jews sway back and forth during prayer. We call it *shuckeling*.

Tourists at the Western Wall, as well as less conversant observers of prayer in all locales, are often perplexed or even put-off by the seemingly strange calisthenics or fanatical antics of over-enthusiastic Jews in prayer mode. But Rabbi Shimon Schwab, of blessed memory, offered a simple yet penetrating insight.

There are two primary vehicles for Godly service -- fear and love. Both are necessary components of a comprehensive and satisfying relationship with Him. Fear and love can perhaps be depicted by the manner in which we address Him. When we use the third person -- *He*, *Him*, *His*, in the vernacular -- it expresses awe, fear, reverence. Second person terminology -- *You* -- is a more casual and direct pronoun; perhaps portraying love. The swaying, or *shuckeling*, during prayer is an external

manifestation of both properties -- as we bend forward (expressing love) and draw away (demonstrating fear).

I gently pressed the button to recline 23K. I turned to the window once more. A momentary splash of turbulence stirred the weary travelers. For just a second, everyone was *shuckeling* -- perhaps more in fear than in love. I smiled.

I gazed out at foreign terrain and alien bodies of water. Again, I felt small, but a good kind of small. Prayer can do that. PP was not something that I had looked forward to. All I had anticipated was how inconvenient and different it was going to be. Well...it was different.

***In a few hours we would land in Israel. Soon thereafter I'll be praying again. I have a feeling it will be different too.***