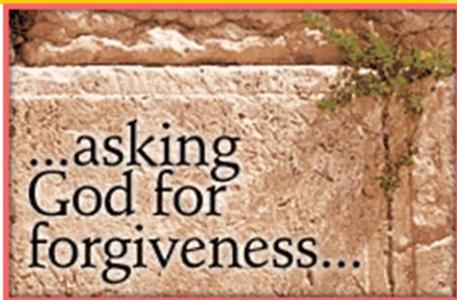


# PRAYING with *Fire*

## PRAYER POINTS



### **Asking God for Forgiveness**

by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

***Skip the paralyzing guilt. The classical confession helps us maximize the power of the day.***

There once was a drought in the land of Israel. The sages pleaded with God for mercy, but their prayers went unanswered in spite of their sincerity. Finally, Rabbi Akiva prayed, addressing God as *Avinu Malkenu*, our Father, our King. It was then that rain began to fall, nourishing the parched earth.

Rabbi Akiva's words opened the hearts and souls of not only that generation but also many future ones. We learned to see God not only as a monarch, but also as a loving parent.

One of the most distinct characteristics of a parent/child relationship is its unconditionality. Parents and children may feel alienated, but they can never cease to be linked. On Yom Kippur the opportunity to re-experience God's love for us is greater than it is at any other time. What that means is that God makes it possible to break down the most resilient barrier that we can erect separating us from our Father – the barrier of sin.

The word "sin" has a terrible reputation. It is associated with paralyzing guilt that reduces our souls to dust. In fact, there are three words in Hebrew that describe "sin" which is really a failure of honest self-expression:

- One is *chet*, which literally means missing the mark.
- The second is *avon*, which means desire.
- The third is *pasha*, which means rebellion.

When we take responsibility for our actions and for the direction that our lives have taken, (even when our decisions were colored by other people or external factors), we can begin to move forward. As long as we deny where we stand today, we will find that we are still there tomorrow.

There is one major obstacle to self-change. The past cannot be re-lived. The patterns that we have allowed ourselves to develop are extremely difficult to break.

How many times do we find ourselves trapped by the insidious, invisible automatic pilot. What frees us from the burden of self-imposed rigidity is God Himself. He is willing to reverse the laws of cause and effect in order to liberate us from ourselves. The one condition that is required is that we take responsibility for our choices and regret the damage that we have done.

The classical confession is the means that we use to do this. It is said five times on Yom Kippur during each of the silent standing prayers, the "Amidah". Rather than ending our silent devotion by beseeching God to grant us peace, we add the confession before concluding.

By studying this confession, we can do the inner work to maximize the power of the day. Let us look at it carefully.

## The Confession

**ASHAMNU:** We have become desolate. We commit ourselves to recognizing that our failures are self-destructive.

**BAGADNU:** We have betrayed our potential, our families, God Himself. We can question who we have been in our multifaceted role as a human being and as a Jew? Who have we betrayed? Is it not ultimately ourselves as well as others?

**GAZALNU:** We have stolen. This includes not only financial theft, but theft of time, and misleading others into thinking that we are more accomplished than we actually are. This sin is especially damaging in that it reflects the fact that we have rejected the role in life that God has given us.

**DEBARNU DOFI:** We have spoken with "two mouths" – we have been hypocritical. We can confront our fear of rejection, and the dishonesty that we use to "cover ourselves." Who are we afraid of? Why? Should we not be more willing to tackle the reality that confronts us?

**HEYVINU:** We have made things crooked. This includes all forms of dishonest rationalizations. Our hunger for decency sometimes is satiable through false justifications. We must remember that even a murderer invariably justifies himself at the time he commits the crime. We must rise above the false self-pity that at times lets us slip into situational ethics.

**VI'HIRSHANU:** And we have made others wicked. We have forced others into destructive responses. An example of this is a parent who slaps the face of an older child, almost forcing him into loss of verbal (and possibly even physical) self-control.

**ZADNU:** We have sinned intentionally. The classical example is lying, in which case there is always full awareness of the factuality of the sin. How could we learn to bring God back into our consciousness when we are blinded by stress and fear?

**CHAMASNU:** We have been violent. This includes all forms of taking the law in one's own hands. Almost everyone has fallen into the trap of letting the ends justify the means.

**TAFALNU SHEKER:** We have become desensitized to dishonesty. Dishonesty feels "normal" to us. When we live in a time and place where lying is "normal," we can endeavor to envision our spiritual heroes in our shoes.

**YATZNU RA:** We have given bad advice. This often is the result of being ashamed to admit ignorance. One of the most beautiful aspects of taking counsel from the Torah sages is their refreshing ability to use the words "I don't know." Committing ourselves to re-introduce this phrase can be life-changing.

**KIZAVNU:** We have disappointed God, ourselves and others by not living up to our promises. We tell people that we can be counted upon, when we really mean that we can be counted upon if things work out. When they don't, it is important to ask one's self: Why is it that in situations where integrity and convenience can't coexist, it is always integrity that must be sacrificed?

**LATZNU:** We have been contemptuous. We have diminished the importance of people and values that deserve respect. We all know at least one person who makes himself/herself "big" by devaluing others. If that person is ourselves, then we must question the direction that our need for self-esteem takes us.

**MARADNU:** We have rebelled. We, in our bottomless insecurity, have found ourselves negatively proving ourselves endlessly both to God and to our fellow man. How many times this year could our lives be spiritually improved, if we didn't have to "teach" anyone a lesson?

**NI'ATZNU:** We have enraged people. We have purposely pushed other people's buttons. We have caused God's anger to be awakened by our self-destructive behavior. We've let our desire for human connection lead us to destructive interactions.

**SARARNU:** We have turned aside. We have confronted truth and looked the other way. We have chosen ease over morality.

**AVINU:** We fallen victim to our impulses. Would our lives be improved if we learned to not only ask ourselves the question "what" but the question "when"? The desire for instant gratification has financial, physical and emotional implications.

**PASHANU:** We have broken standards of behavior that we know to be right and then justified this because of our egotism. Have we not found ourselves justifying bad decisions with lie after lie? Have we not moved forward because to do so would mean tacitly admitting that our present level is not "perfect" enough to gratify our bottomless egos?

**TZARARNU:** We afflicted others. Even in situations where harsh words are demanded, whenever we go beyond what is called for, we are accountable for the pain suffered by every unnecessary word. While we may be just letting off steam, our victims may believe every word that we say. The result can be a tragic diminishment of their self-esteem.

**KISHINU OREF:** We have been stiff-necked. We have been stubborn and unwilling to redefine ourselves. No matter how wrong we are, we insist that we are right.

**RISHANU:** We have been wicked. This includes all forms of physical aggression or financial injustice (such as refusal to repay a loan). When Moses saw his fellow Jew striking another Jew, he called him "rasha." He never used this phrase in any other context.

**SHICHATNU:** We have been immoral. This includes all forms of dehumanizing "hunting" members of the opposite sex, or the equally dehumanizing choice of becoming "prey." Do we question why we select a specific image to be the one that we use to let the world know who we are?

**TA'INU:** We have erred. This, of course, is not a reference to sins that we have done because we weren't aware of better options. This refers to the choice to remain ignorant out of fear or laziness that inevitably leads to making further mistakes. This is a good time to make a solid, defined resolution to learn more. Let it replace the vague realization that time is slipping by.

**TITANU:** We have misled others. We have spread our ignorant assumptions and thereby victimized others.

The purpose of studying this list is not to wallow in guilt. It is to bring us to the point where we can honestly come before God and say, "This is who I was. Help me be who I want to be. Help me find my truest self."

***His help is guaranteed. He is our Father, not only our King.***