

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



Four Steps to Effective Prayer

Am I talking to a wall? And doesn't God already know what I need?

by [Dina Coopersmith](#)

There are four primary misconceptions that prevent us from effectively communicating with our Creator through [prayer](#).

1. **It feels like we are talking to a wall.** Since we don't actually see God or sense Him with any of our five senses, how can we have a conversation with Him? A one-way dialogue is awkward at best; at worst a little crazy.
2. **It makes no sense to pray to God if He knows our needs.** He'll either give us what we want if we need it, or He won't if we don't. How can prayer change His mind?
3. **God doesn't seem to answer our prayers.** Sometimes we pray for an ill person and he dies anyway. Or we pray for years to find a soul-mate or to have children and our requests go unanswered. So why keep trying?
4. **Standardized prayer is a drag.** How can you have a natural conversation with someone if you don't get to decide what to say and when to say it? That's not called communication.

Let's explore each of these blocks and see how a small change in perspective can make all the difference.

1. It feels like I'm talking to a wall.

Most people believe in the power of prayer. Late for an important meeting and looking for a parking spot, taking a major exam, if a loved one is sick, we instinctively utter a prayer and ask for help. That means we must believe that we are talking to Someone real out there.

How many times have you spoken to a friend on the phone, possibly not letting him/her get a word in edge-wise for a half hour straight? You spoke without losing your train of thought, with passion and interest, without seeing or hearing the person on the other end! Your knowledge that they were listening was so strong that you managed a monologue beautifully!

So, it is not the lack of tangibility that causes us to lose interest in prayer; it's that we don't concretize to ourselves how real God is, and what an incredible opportunity it is to speak to Him.

Imagine you were told that the [President of the United States](#) will be sitting at his phone tomorrow morning at 8 am sharp, waiting for your call, and prepared to give you 20 minutes of his time to hear your concerns and answer your questions.

Is there a chance you'd oversleep or need to do other things instead?

God, who is infinitely more powerful and benevolent than the President, has given you His personal cell phone number and is waiting for your call. When you pray, meditate for a few moments on the fact that you are having a rendezvous with the Master of the Universe.

2. God knows what I need. Why is prayer necessary?

On the sixth day of creation, before man was created, it says:

"And no tree of the land had grown and no shrubs of the field were existent because no man was there to work the land" (Genesis, 2:5).

This is odd since on the third day of creation it says:

"And the earth brought forth grass ...trees of fruit..." (Genesis, 1:12)

Where was all the grass that was created on the third day by the time the sixth day rolled around?

Rashi, an 11th century commentator, explains:

"Since there was no man yet to appreciate the need for rain, God held the grass and trees under the surface of the ground until man came, prayed for rain, and then it rained and they pushed forth out of the ground" (Rashi on Genesis, 2:5).

This is a profound concept to think about. God had intended all along to allow man to enjoy fruit and vegetables, grass and trees, but He made sure that first Adam and Eve felt the lack, turned to God to request it, and only then He gave them what they asked for.

God creates a need because He desires a relationship with you. He wants you to turn to Him.

In fact, having all you need is not necessarily a blessing. In the story of Adam and Eve, the snake was given the following consequence for his part in the sin: "You are the most cursed of all the creatures...on your belly you shall crawl and your food will be the dust of the earth" (Genesis, 3:14).

Sounds like a good deal: you crawl around on the ground and your livelihood and sustenance is everywhere! The commentaries explain that God is telling the snake, "I don't want to ever see you or hear from you again. Here's everything you need. Have a nice life. Now get out of here."

Rabbi Noah Weinberg, zt"l, told a story about Steve, who went away to college back in the olden days when there was no Internet and only snail mail.

Weeks passed with not a single word from Steve. His parents were beside themselves with worry and frustration. One day Steve's grandfather came over with a letter from Steve, detailing all his courses, his social life, his experiences on campus. His parents were amazed. "How did you get a letter from him? We must have sent a dozen letters and messages and no word!"

"Well," Grandpa said, "I sent him a letter requesting to hear all about life in college, told him we were all worried, signed, 'Your loving Grandpa. P.S. Enclosed is a check for \$100 to use at your discretion.' And I didn't enclose the check."

Yes, God knows what we need. But He wants the relationship.

As long as Steve had all he needed, he wasn't motivated to turn to his parents or grandparents just to shoot the breeze. But once a lack was created, the thought of having had that \$100 was strong enough to motivate him to write back, describe college at length, and then add a P.S at the end "By the way, Gramps, you forgot to enclose that check!"

Yes, God knows what we need; after all He's the One giving us those lacks. But He wants the relationship; He wants us to turn to Him, acknowledge His presence and realize He's the source of what we need.

3. God doesn't seem to answer our prayers

A change of perspective is crucial here: God is always listening and [answering our prayers](#). It's up to us to listen to the answers. Sometimes the answer is "no." Sometimes it's "not right now" or "work on patience or some other character trait and ask me again next week/ next month/ next year."

We must evaluate whether what we asked for was truly beneficial to us in the long run. If it is, maybe there's some other growth that is expected of us in order to receive what we wish for.

God is not a candy machine. Asking sparks, a dialogue. We need to learn to look out for God's responses, try to understand and accept them, and then re-evaluate our own choices and requests. And keep asking, with renewed understanding, awareness, trust and connection to God.

4. Why standardized prayer?

Imagine you had to make an important presentation to a board of trustees as part of your application for a large grant. Would you write down some notes to make sure you didn't forget crucial details? Would you be thrilled to get some excellent advice from experts in the field who know many "tricks of the trade"?

Like speaking to the CEO of a major firm, when speaking to God, it's important to have clarity about what you want and why you want it, in order to achieve maximum results. The Sages of the Great Assembly, comprised of Torah giants, wrote the main prayers found in the Siddur, the Jewish prayer book, giving us a structure to use when approaching God. The structure turns our focus to three things: to Whom we are speaking, what we should be asking for, and how to properly acknowledge and thank God for what we have.

If it were left up to our mood or our own evaluation of our needs, it's likely that our prayers would be inconsistent and lack clarity. The Sages are giving us insider secrets – here are the essential things to ask for. This is what's really important. Standardized prayer serves as the starting point for our dialogue with God. It should not end there.

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We need to inject our personal feelings and requests into the standard formula and make the words our own. Without that, prayer is reduced to a mechanical recitation of a script, like a telemarketer's opening lines. Where's the genuine relationship?

You need to "get off the page" and speak freely with God, express your deep desires, wishes and feelings within the standard formula.

This takes preparation, like any important presentation. Give yourself a few minutes at the start of the day and think about your personal needs. Then take a look at the Amidah prayer, the main prayer which includes 19 blessings encompassing the Jewish people's overarching dreams and needs: health, livelihood, wisdom, redemption, peace etc.

Take your list of needs, find the blessing that matches your need, and insert your personal words in to the blessing, in your own language with your own reflections and nuances.

For example, your son has been misbehaving and you're anticipating having a difficult conversation today with his teacher. You might put in the request for wisdom: "Please help me find the words with which to explain to the teacher why I need to keep this kid in class; please give the teacher the insight to perceive the causes for my child's difficulties and help us both have the wisdom to figure out a solution that will be best for all parties involved."

Answered Prayer

I learn over the phone with Yonah, a self-proclaimed non-religious woman from Tel Aviv. Last week she told me that she's been going through some financial difficulties, and that she really wanted some extra cash, so she could take some time off to come to Jerusalem to study on a regular basis. "So I woke up very early one morning and discussed the problem with God." By 2:00pm that afternoon, she had two new clients make appointments to see her, "and these two people are committed to coming for a while and have already recommended me to a number of other people. I didn't even know how to pray, but my prayers were answered!"

I was amazed. Here is a woman who calls herself non-religious and yet she wakes up early in the morning to pray? And she wasn't even surprised that her prayer was answered. "I've been thinking a lot about this entity you call God, and I realized that the natural consequence of this belief in an Infinite Being is that He can do anything He wants, He has all the power in the world, and He hears me when I speak to Him. How could I not take advantage of such an opportunity?"

Yonah understood the art of Jewish prayer. She turned to God, connecting to His presence and power, she had the clarity about what she needed and why, and she spoke to God directly, with sincerity, in her own words, and then waited to for an answer.

We can all learn from Yonah. Pick up the phone. God is waiting for our call.