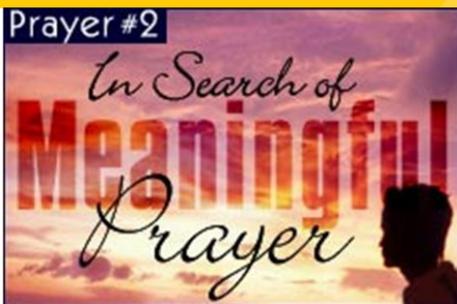


PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



In Search of Meaningful Prayer

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The difference between the words in the seemingly incomprehensible Siddur and those in your heart is your understanding. Here's how to make them one and the same.

There are no atheists in a foxhole. Simply explained, this means that when people are in trouble, they instinctively turn to God, even the ones who previously said with confidence, "I don't believe in God." There's nothing like trouble to bring the prayer out in people.

Of course, no one wants to be "pushed" into praying to God. Praying to God is one of the most natural human experiences and can also be one of the most pleasurable ones as well. Like every "art," there is a certain amount of honing that is required before the "natural talent" can become the basis for a creative and productive result.

While it is true that impending disaster can turn atheists into "believers," and, that crises can give meaning to prayer that, previously, didn't seem to exist, that can be accomplished in a more pleasant manner. The following will help you tap into your natural ability to pray, and, show you how to make the words of the *Siddur* more personal to you.

WHAT DO THESE WORDS MEAN?

If you go to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, at any given moment, in time on any given day, you will find people with their face pressed into the Holy Wall. It is not unusual to find tears streaming down their faces, falling onto already tear-stained books of *Tehillim* (Psalms). They are completely "given over" to God and their prayers. Why, and how?

For many, these tears are the result of their complete sincerity and recognition of their dependency on God. Their prayer stems from a deep yearning for something they need.

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For meaningful prayer, tap into what your soul needs from God. For example, let's look at one of the first blessings of the daily *Shemoneh Esrai*, the so-called "Eighteen Benedictions." It says:

You give man knowledge, and You teach people ideas, understanding, and comprehension. Blessed are You, Who gives knowledge.

Something we take for granted is our ability to think. "I think, therefore I am" pretty much sums up our attitude toward our mind. If I'm alive, of course I can think. However, a more accurate statement might be: If I am living, then, my brain must be functioning and keeping me alive. But that is all I can assume.

However, *thinking* is a process of recognizing ideas and understanding them, and then figuring out how they can best serve mankind. Human ingenuity in any form is not something to be taken for granted, for, it is mankind's greatest gift, often saving us from the brink of disaster.

Certain bodily functions controlled by the mind, what we call "involuntary functions" of the brain, may work in the direst of circumstances. However, thinking seems to be more of an art than a natural talent, something learned and developed as one matures in life. It is not always an automatic process.

If so, then why must I petition God for understanding, and thank Him for my ability to discern? Because our brains are so important to us, and, being able to think clearly is crucial for living a meaningful and productive life. Getting ahead in life depends upon coming up with ideas and understanding them, in order to know how to implement them to improve the quality of our lives.

For, historically, we have seen how even the brightest and sharpest thinkers in life can "miss the boat" when it comes to the purpose of life in this world, and waste a whole lifetime pursuing meaningless paths. The brain is but a vehicle to process and implement ideas, and, even a sharp mind is no guarantee that a person will live a profoundly truthful life.

Hence, it says in the Book of Psalms:

The secrets of God to those who fear Him. (25:14)

In other words, all those ideas and all that understanding that we assume are natural in life are miracles. Even though ideas just seem to "pop" into our minds, as if it is the most natural thing in the

world to be clever, that is rarely the case. In fact, perhaps, this is why historical discoveries are often made at the same time, by different people, in different parts of the world, even though one did not communicate with the other. From God's point of view, it was an idea whose time had come, and, which, therefore, had become the "spirit" of the times.

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One person said: It only took one trip to a children's hospital and to see all these beautiful children born without the ability to think for themselves to make the blessing of knowledge real to me. When I say it, I think to myself, "Where would I be without my brain, without my ability to understand, without my ability to solve problems?" Nowhere. Saying this blessing, therefore, is extremely important to me.

Thus, in the end, this first "request" of the "Eighteen Benedictions" can be understood as follows:

You graciously give man knowledge (all the important ideas that advance mankind and provide solutions for the problems in life come from You, even though we don't deserve them), and teach a person understanding (and, as well, You give us the ability to relate to these ideas, and to benefit from them). From You, graciously endow us with knowledge (abstract ideas), understanding (and the ability to relate to them), and discernment (and to integrate their truth into our own way of thinking. Blessed are You, God, gracious Giver of knowledge.

That kind of analysis can be, and should be, done with all the blessings.

WRITE YOUR OWN PRAYER

The difference between the words on the page and those in your heart is your understanding of how they are one and the same.

The "Men of the Great Assembly" (c. 260 BCE) who assembled the prayer book were prophets, and they had the needs of the entire nation in mind, for *all* generations. They weren't just directing us in prayer; they were teaching us what counts most in life to the Jew. If the words seem foreign to us, it is because we have yet to see their words through our own eyes.

But, that is the goal. And, when one achieves this, prayer becomes a completely personalized experience, and, *enjoyable*. So, you might as well try this next step and enhance your prayer experience.

1. Choose a short prayer from any part of the prayer service, from a section that you don't feel comfortable with.
2. Ask yourself, "What does this prayer ask for?" and answer the question.
3. Ask yourself, "How does such an idea benefit the world?"
4. Ask yourself, "How would my life improve from such an idea?"

5. Write a short essay "justifying" the request of this prayer. If necessary, find adequate sources on prayer, and do research.

If you do this, the next time you say these words in prayer, you will immediately connect to them, and you will feel "lifted" because of them. You will begin to feel close to God, and this will enhance your entire prayer experience. Some people even write little notes on the pages of their prayer books just to remind themselves at the time of prayer of the conclusions they reached through this type of analysis.

You could do this for every individual prayer and spend the rest of your life doing nothing but this. However, very few people have the luxury of spending so much time on such a project. Nevertheless, it has been my experience, and that of others who have tried this, performing the five steps above at least a couple of times, makes them somewhat automatic, even during times of prayer, until the entire prayer service itself becomes your own.