

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



The Most Important Thing that I Learned in Israel

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Prayer is the quill of the heart.

I am 38 years old and I am just learning how to pray.

I grew up in a town on Long Island with very few Jews and regular prayer just wasn't part of my daily life. I'm trying to make it part of my life now. My family joined a synagogue last year and I am proud that we're choosing to engage in a Jewish life.

It's part of why I applied to go to Israel with the Jewish Women's Renaissance Project. I met the wonderful women of JInspire Queens and couldn't wait to spend more time with them and learn from them.

Yet as our departure date inched closer, I got nervous. I didn't know anyone else going on the trip. I knew I had been raised in a less observant home than many of the other women that I'd meet. Would they teach me or judge me? I was suddenly struck by insecurity.

But I wouldn't let those fears mar this once-in-a-lifetime chance to go to Israel and connect with other Jewish women. The ladies in my group were wonderful, so I took a deep breath and asked questions. I asked them for help when I needed it. Each time, I was given answers and kind smiles.

We were scheduled to go to the Western Wall on a Thursday evening. Before we left, we attended a lecture, and then the participants in my group were given a siddur. Our names were embossed in gold.

I traced the letters with my finger. I opened the cover and touched the smooth pages. I could not believe this beautiful prayer book was mine.

As we walked, my mind raced. I was about to pray at the holiest spot in the Jewish world, to stand by stones that had stood for 2000 years. Generations of Jews had prayed for the experience I had miraculously been given. I closed my eyes briefly.

I tried to quiet my mind. And the names of my family members, past and present, popped into my head. I smiled and quietly recited their names. My great-great-grandparents and my great-grandparents. My grandma and grandpa. My mother and father. None of them had ever been to Israel, yet I was standing at the Kotel. I am here, I said. I am Jewish. I did not, will not break the chain.

I said the Shehechyanu. I touched the wall with my both hands, ensuring that my rings – my wedding ring on my left hand, a mother's ring adorned with my daughters' birthstones on my right – made contact with the stones. I stepped back and opened my beautiful siddur.

I was surrounded by several hundred members of the JWRP, tour groups from all over the world, students, and Israeli women. A half-dozen languages floated through the air. Occasionally someone would cry. Tears blurred my vision, but I wiped them away. I wanted to see it all, hear it all, absorb it all.

My first prayers at the Wall were imperfect, but each time I stumbled, I remembered what our trip leader had said. She told us that we could read from the siddur or say something completely different. She told us, "Prayer is the quill of the heart."

That phrase stuck with me. Standing in the middle of a crowd at the Kotel, I realized that writing is how I pray. It's how I have learned to ask questions. It is how I process my mistakes. It is how I show gratitude. It's how I express my deepest wishes for my family and myself and send them to God. In Israel, I discovered that there's more than one way to speak to God. If prayer is the quill of the heart, then I've had the words inside of me, all along.