

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



Chris Pratt, Keep Praying

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When did prayer become a dirty word?

“Thoughts and prayers” are out of fashion. We first saw pushback to “thoughts and prayers” following the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. It intensified in 2015, in the wake of the Paris and San Bernardino attacks. Following the recent Florida school shooting, the online community no longer has any patience whatsoever for “thoughts and prayers.”

Initially, I found this understandable. When politicians tweeted “thoughts and prayers” to victims and their families, the public was responding by saying, “We don’t want platitudes, we want action!” At least, that’s how I understood it.

Then Kevin Smith had a heart attack.

Smith, the filmmaker behind *Clerks*, *Dogma*, and many other motion pictures, suffered a massive heart attack that almost killed him. In response, actor Chris Pratt took to [Twitter](#) and wrote, “Praying for you”. The Twitterati weren’t having it. Responses included:

- Doctors and nurses save lives, not prayer.
- There is NO proof there is a higher power. Zilch.
- We all know God isn’t real.

- Praying is utterly worthless. Just an easy way to pat yourself on the back while making you warm and fuzzy inside by actually thinking your prayers affect the plan of a divine sky daddy that's supposedly omniscient (sic) and omnipotent.
- Thank the surgeons and modern medicine. Your magical sky fairy had nothing to do with it I assure you.
- A claim that prayer heals is dangerous. It results in needless deaths every year around the globe.

In fairness, there were many who came to Pratt's defense, including screenwriter and director James Gunn (*Guardians of the Galaxy*), who wrote, "There is nothing wrong with sending someone positive thoughts & prayers. But when this is coupled with inaction when action will benefit the situation, it's empty. ... (N)o one expects Chris Pratt to shoulder doctors out of the way and perform heart surgery on Kevin Smith. Nor does Kevin need Chris to pay his medical bills. So I think his prayers are appreciated, and about all he can do."

Gunn gets it. It's one thing to object to "thoughts and prayers" when it's in lieu of action. But if "thoughts and prayers" are all one has to offer, then objecting to it is nothing more than a mean-spirited attack on another person's faith.

In Judaism, we have two concepts: *bitachon* (faith in God) and *hishtadlus* (human effort). Both are considered necessary, as we see in many places.

The Talmud in tractate Brachos (35b) discusses the verse "you will gather in your grain" (Deut. 11:14). Rabbi Yishmael explains this verse to mean that one is expected to pursue a living in the normal manner, planting and harvesting his crops at the appropriate times. Rabbi Shimon disagrees. He maintains that those who dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to God will receive their sustenance without any effort of their own. The later sage Abaye observes that those who followed Rabbi Yishmael's approach – combining their own efforts with faith – were largely successful. Those who tried Rabbi Shimon's approach of faith alone tended not to succeed.

Maimonides [codifies Rabbi Yishmael's approach](#), saying that all Torah study must be accompanied by at least some work (Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:9) and that Torah study without work will ultimately be nullified and lead to sin (ibid., 3:10).

Similarly, [the Chovos HaLevavos says](#) that the proper way to show our faith in God is to engage in the occupations He has provided us to the extent necessary to secure our livings. If God wants us to have more, He'll take care of it. Conversely, if no more has been decreed for a person, then no means in Heaven or on Earth could possibly secure it for him (*Shaar HaBitachon* Chapter 4).

The mishna in Ethics of the Fathers (2:16) tells us that we're not necessarily responsible to finish a task – such may not be within our control – but that doesn't exempt us from investing our best efforts in the attempt.

So human effort is definitely necessary, but so is *bitachon* (faith in God). The Torah tells us (Exodus 21:18-19) that if one person injures another, the aggressor must pay for his victim's medical bills. Clearly, seeing a doctor is okay – that's responsible effort. Nevertheless, King Asa was punished for relying on doctors [to the exclusion of God](#) (II Chronicles 16:12). Even Joseph was punished for a lack of faith when he relied on Pharaoh's wine steward to get him out of prison rather than on God.

Effort and faith go hand in hand. If someone says that "thoughts and prayers" are not enough, I'll be inclined to agree. "Thoughts and prayers" are meant to be coupled with actions, whether that means working for a living, seeking medical attention or advocating for legislation. But if someone objects to "thoughts and prayers" *in addition* to action, or in a case where literally no action can be taken? That reveals a very different agenda.

We believe in prayer. We also believe in action. And we absolutely need both. We are expected to invest our best efforts to effect positive change, but we must also recognize that, ultimately, everything is up to God.