

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



A Jewish Mantra

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How an ancient 12-word Jewish prayer changed my life.

About one year ago, I began the daily practice of saying *Modeh Ani*,¹ the short prayer said aloud upon awakening. Who knew that 12 words would have such an enormous impact on my life?

Here I was a late 20-something and I was experiencing anxiety attacks and depression that left me feeling alone, isolated and disconnected. My problems seemed unsurmountable and I was struggling to make my way out of this rough patch.

I had tried everything from “focusing on the breath” to Buddhist meditation classes on compassion to transcendental meditation. While it relaxed me in the moment, none of it stuck. I still found myself going back to the same old comfortable routines that confined me.

Then I started reciting *Modeh Ani*. I was skeptical, to say the least. But sometimes when we are down on our knees, we’re willing to give something new a chance, and watching my father receive treatment after treatment for the cancer that was slowly taking his life brought me to my knees.

The following three insights arose from my own daily recitation of *Modeh Ani*. Like a rose, each petal, each word, began to blossom and unfold.

1. Your faithfulness is great

There were many mornings when I just didn't want to wake up. It seemed easier to stay under the covers than to face the growing demands and responsibilities of being an adult. I didn't have dreams of being truly happy and free. My life seemed stagnant in hues of grey, consisting of going to an unfulfilling job, to a diminishing social circle to weight-management or lack thereof. In the back of my mind I wondered how I could change my life for the better. How could I climb my mountain?

I started with a baby step – saying *Modeh Ani*. Every day, I would focus in on the words, "Your faithfulness is great." God, a higher power, believed in me. Not a little, not somewhat, but *greatly!* Whatever word you choose to use, an all-encompassing being, believed in ME and believes in YOU.

I started to allow the words to penetrate and supersede the negative beliefs I had about myself. I began taking on greater responsibilities as a team-leader at a local soup kitchen. Whereas, I used to be shy and avoid social gatherings with new faces, I began going to social events and developing richer relationships with a variety of people. I no longer saw myself as a victim. If a friend was in need, I pitched in to help.

If God believes that I have everything I need within me in order to fulfill my day, my mission, then who am I to disagree?

2. You... restored my soul within me

As miserable as I felt at times, I had another day. *You... restored my soul within me*. The verbalization of those words elicited the realization that we don't wake up by accident. I didn't *coincidentally* wake up; another day was gifted to me with intention. Whether that day felt like a blessing or a curse, I was still 6 feet above ground.

Did I overeat the night before? Would it be nice to meet my soul mate? Was the weather crummy, cold, and snowing? Yes, this was a New York winter!

There are so many ways to be pulled down in this life. But call me crazy, I started to literally stop and smell the roses for sale at the local bodega. I laughed a little harder with my friends at work. I began appreciating the one thing nearly all of us take for granted: life.

Each day, we can choose to take one moment to receive some pleasure from our environment, no matter what the circumstance may be. That is pretty awesome.

3. I give thanks before You

When you're miserable, the last thing you want to do is give appreciation. For what? What did I have to be truly deeply grateful for? I was spending many hours watching my father go in for chemotherapy, for radiation, for brain surgery. He grew thin, bald, and sickly. It pained me to visit him in his last days. He couldn't breathe, and I felt the same way. From where was I to gain the strength to be happy, as I knew my father wanted for me?

I read studies showing the positive impact of being grateful, about the power of starting a gratitude journal and listing three new things a day that you're grateful for. (Check out Shawn Achor's [TED talks](#) on happiness and positive psychology.) Lo and behold, identifying things that you appreciate in your life works to increase your happiness.

So, I grabbed a pen and paper and began a gratitude journal. Did I hear a kind word from a friend? Hug and kiss a child? Do a generous deed to help another? Feel the sun on my skin? Make my morning train just in time? When you place your attention on the "small" pleasures of life, that becomes your reality.

And isn't that the essence of *Modeh Ani*?

The *Modeh Ani* prayer transformed the way I view life. I've learned to let go and tap into the power of appreciation, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-acceptance. I'm living one day at a time knowing God believes in me and seeing the good that surrounds me. I can't think of a better way to start your day.

In memory of my father Chaim Meir Ben Feiga Yetta

1. Here is the full text of the prayer: "Modeh Ani lefanecha melech chai vekayam, she-he-che-zarta bee nishmatee b'chemla raba emunatecha." I offer thanks before you, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great.