

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



Ten Lessons on maximizing prayer during the Ten Days of Repentance.

Day 6

How Prayer Works

Just like you need to know more than how to turn on a computer to derive its maximum benefit, prayer also requires an understanding of what makes it work in order to benefit from its unlimited potential.

Praying to God to alleviate a difficult situation presents a bit of a paradox. There are two fundamental concepts of Jewish thought that would make it seem that prayer should not be able to accomplish such a task. One concept is that God causes everything, whether it appears to us to be good, bad or somewhere in between. He sends the illness from which we pray to be cured. He sends the enemies from whom we pray to be saved. If He didn't want us to suffer these difficulties, it would seem that He wouldn't send them in the first place.

The second basic concept is that everything God does is, at its root, good. We believe that God is perfect and complete goodness, and that when we suffer, it is for some greater purpose in this world or in the spiritual world. Sometimes you see the good with your own eyes: You break up with someone you love, but marry someone so much better for you. You spend a week sick in bed, but discover how much you're loved and needed. Often, however, we don't perceive the good, and can only derive comfort from the knowledge that, in the Divine, omniscient view of things, the good is there.

This raises some questions: Why would God change a situation in response to our prayers if in His judgment, the situation was good? Why would we even be allowed to ask Him to do so?

The answer to these questions is a fascinating look at how prayer actually operates in the material and the spiritual worlds. Rabbi Joseph Albo, a great mystic and philosopher, examined the question of how prayer works to change a Heavenly decree. He explained that it does not change the decree; it changes the object of the decree. The person to whom God has sent poverty or illness or some other difficulty can, by praying, change his spiritual identity to the point where the necessity of enduring the difficulty has been eliminated.

Jane the Spiritual Underachiever might require a frightening bout of pneumonia to awaken her to the need for a life of deeper meaning. But if now, after the fourth antibiotic has failed, she is motivated to reach out to God and forge a relationship, she is no longer Jane the Spiritual Underachiever. She is now Jane the Exalted, and the pneumonia has no further purpose. The fifth antibiotic works.

The words of prayer themselves can be a powerful catalyst for this change. It may seem that when we pray, we are sending an Earth-to-Heaven communication. But in fact, the words of our Hebrew liturgy possess an intense spiritual power that flows from Heaven to Earth. The prayers we recite were composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, the holiest and most learned men of the times of the Second Temple. They were guided by *ruach Hakodesh*, Divine inspiration, to choose words that would possess the ability to uplift those who recited them with sincerity. These words are the active ingredient in the spiritual medicine that is prayer. (That's why, even though all prayers are understood and accepted, it is always worthwhile to master the standard Hebrew liturgy.)

When a person faces suffering and challenge, he prays. But his prayer does not change God's mind. It changes who the person is, and that changes everything.

Day 7

When the Bad Guy Finishes First

Chances are you know this man. Let's call him Oscar. He's fabulously successful but has never given a penny to charity. He avoids doing favors for anyone but the people he wants to impress. He cheats in business, oppresses his employees and causes general unhappiness wherever he goes. The only thing he prays to is the Dow Jones index.

If, as we learned earlier, prayer is the only way to bring blessing down from Heaven into our lives, how can we account for the fleet of cars, mansion and small castle in Ireland that belong to this obnoxious and irreverent person? To what does he owe this overdose of material blessing?

Unfortunately for Oscar, the bounty he enjoys is not what we would define as a blessing. If need -- financial, physical, emotional or spiritual -- is the means by which God awakens us to seek a connection to Him, you can be sure that Oscar has been left to remain fast asleep. His amazing mass of stuff is nothing more than a strong indication that God has given up on him and anesthetized his soul with enough wealth to keep him numb for a lifetime. There's nothing to be accomplished with poor, pathetic Oscar, God has apparently determined. The perfection of his soul will have to wait for its arrival in the spiritual world, or perhaps for another lifetime.

Of gains amassed by unsavory people, the famous European scholar Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler explains, "It is not really a blessing since there is no Heavenly help in it. It lacks a spiritual source. In addition, it brings no satisfaction to the owner. It accomplishes nothing."

A further insight into this question comes, as so much basic wisdom does, from the prototype of Creation. In the well-known episode of the Garden of Eden, there are three protagonists -- Adam, Eve and the snake. The snake convinces Eve to eat the fruit God has forbidden her and Adam to eat. Then Eve, in turn, drags Adam into the crime by getting him to take a bite.

God punishes all three of them, but the nature of their punishments is very different. Adam is given the burden of earning a livelihood. Eve is given the difficulty of childbirth and childrearing. The snake loses his legs and is told that he will eat the dust. If we follow those "curses" to their logical consequences, we see that the snake received the only real curse. What Adam and Eve were given was a life-long open line of communication with God. Nothing spurs a mother's prayers more than her worries, hopes and fears for her children. Nothing prods a breadwinner to pray more than the insecurities and risks of agriculture, business or career. Man and woman were assured through these decrees that they would always have reason to turn their eyes up to Heaven and say, "Help me, please." Mankind would be able to remain spiritually alive.

On the other hand, the snake would never need anything. Dust is plentiful, ubiquitous. The snake would never have to lift his head out of the dirt to seek Heaven's help. That is a real curse. And like the snake, a person who is surrounded by everything he will ever need is completely cut off from anything spiritual, unless he makes a constant, conscious effort to acknowledge the real source of all his blessing.

Of all the benefits a person might ask for in prayer, there is no benefit greater than the desire and ability to pray. This is what keeps us spiritually alive. Through prayer, all the difficulties and needs that beset our lives actually become the source of our greatest blessing -- the incomparable inner happiness that comes from drawing closer to God.

Day 8

Out Loud

Did you ever take a look at some sheet music, follow the little dots and lines as they run up and down the staff, take a deep sigh and say, "How beautiful!"

Probably not. Except for the rarest of musical minds, a person would have to hear the music played before he could have any kind of emotional response to it.

The same can be said of the words in the prayer book. They are meant to be spoken, not read, and it is only by verbalizing them that you activate their full transforming power. Silent reading, even with full comprehension of what you're reading, is still only reading.

In the introduction to the *Shemoneh Esrei*, the 18 blessings that are the centerpiece of Jewish prayer, there is a brief petition: "God, open my lips and my mouth will speak Your praises." Our concept of prayer is not meditation. Nor is it nice thoughts or even ecstatic experiences. It is the highest function of our power of speech.

Part of the reason speaking the words is so important is that prayer is a spiritual activity. If it is left to be performed on an inner, intellectual level, it becomes completely ephemeral, nothing more than a thought. By transforming it into a physical act of speaking out loud, it becomes something more concrete, something that has the potential to make an impact upon the doer.

The concept might be compared to the difference between feeling regret for having hurt somebody and actually telling the victim of your actions that you're sorry. There's no question saying those words, even over the telephone, gives the situation a far greater sense of reality. The action of saying "I'm sorry" creates a focus and an internal impact that thoughts cannot create.

Another benefit of praying out loud is that it confirms the sense that you're addressing "Someone." It's not easy to keep in mind the invisible, incorporeal Recipient of our praises and petitions. But without the sense that you're standing in front of God and communicating with Him, you're only reciting prayers, not actually praying. Saying the words out loud helps maintain the awareness that the words are going somewhere.

But as important as praying out loud is, just standing there vocalizing a string of Hebrew words won't accomplish anything either. Prayer is known as *avodas ha-lev*, the service of the heart. That means that as much as your lips must move, your heart must be moved. Using both capacities together, you can really hear the music.

Day 9

Up, Down and All Around

When my children were small, they each in turn went to playgroup at the age of three. There, they each learned the first fundamental concept of the Jewish faith -- a song: "Hashem (God) is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere. Up, down and all around, that's where He can be found."

Someone who masters that point will never have trouble praying meaningfully. Imagine such a person's mind-set. He wakes up and thinks, "Wow, another day of life. Thank God!" and takes his first sip of coffee with the thought, "Good recipe, God. Thanks for the tasty beans and the caffeine kick, too," and sets off to work with the thought, "How could I be so lucky that God led me right to a good job that pays my bills?" He leaves behind his sleeping children in the early morning hours, thinking, "Two perfect little girls. I can't believe You gave me such a gift again today!" By the time this person opens his mouth to pray, he's so overflowing with gratitude to God that he can barely contain himself.

But for most people, the mundane everyday tasks seem to get in the way of spiritual awareness rather than arousing it. People get wrapped up in the details of doing what needs to get done and getting

where they need to go, and find no room in their frazzled minds to emerge from survival mode. It's certainly easier to sense God's presence in a sunset than in a smog alert.

To get the most out of the experience of praying, however, one of the most useful strategies you can pursue is to try to bring more awareness of God into your everyday life. This perspective, little by little, builds a sense of God's presence and tremendously enhances our sense of connection when we embark on formal or even informal prayers.

If you think your life is too hectic to let in a little spirituality, take a look at King David. He had the most chaotic rise to power imaginable, and then reigned over a kingdom that was constantly torn by war. Intrigue and jealousy plagued his rule and his own son tried to dethrone him. It wasn't the kind of life in which a person would normally sit back and write inspirational poetry.

However, King David wrote the Book of Psalms, which forms the basis for many of our prayers. He sought God in everything that happened to him and transformed his pain and his joy into the words Jews have used for millennia to find the strength to face all that has happened to us as a people and as individuals.

The more a person seeks out God, the more God is there for him. Nowhere is this more apparent than in prayer, when a person is actually reaching out to God and actively seeking to feel His presence. If we can manage to see God in the sink-full of dishes, the crazy work deadlines, the traffic jams and electric bills, we are not going to miss Him as we stand in shul surrounded by an aura of holiness. As any three-year-old can tell you, here, there and everywhere is where He can be found.

Day 10

When Prayers Go Unanswered

If I pray, I get whatever I want, right? Ask the father who has lost a child to illness. Ask the child who has lost a parent. Ask the businessman who went bankrupt and had to sell his home, or the boy who can't seem to learn like the other kids in class, or the woman caught in an abusive marriage. They all prayed, and yet their hopes were not realized. If prayer has all the power which we ascribe to it, how could this be?

Ultimately, there is no humanly comprehensible answer to this question, because we are no more capable of understanding God's reasoning than an ant is capable of understanding ours. The only difference is, the ant won't be plagued by the questions. We will.

Therefore, God gives us some windows on His world -- enough to assure us that even when we don't get the answers we seek, His love for us and His benevolent supervision of the world are beyond question. Here, below, are some of the discernible forces that may be in action when a sincere prayer fails to bring its desired result.

- **We don't see the full picture.** If you've ever seen a suspense film, you know the technique in which the camera follows the unsuspecting victim-to-be as he blithely goes about his business. Then it cuts to

the evil-doers, preparing the victim's downfall. The audience goes crazy. You want to jump into the film and warn the innocent party -- don't get in the car! In essence, we live our lives like the characters in the movie, aware of only what's before us, while God sees the whole story unfolding in scenes that might be thousands of miles or thousands of years apart from each other. It may very well be that as we must endure a certain frustration in our lives that, from the God's-eye view, looks very different.

- **We are asking for something that would be counterproductive to our unique purpose.** In "The Fiddler on the Roof," the poor milkman Tevye sings "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?" Well, sometimes it would. God sends each soul to earth with a unique purpose that no one else can fulfill. He gives us access to all the equipment we require to perform our mission, and keeps us from acquiring anything that would interfere with it. Someone whose business simply won't take off, or whose house-hunting in a certain neighborhood just won't render a reasonable prospect, might be looking for something he should not have. For his soul to succeed, he may need to work in a different business or become part of a different neighborhood.
- **We've damaged the 'manufacturing equipment' of our prayers.** If you try to build widgets with a warped widget maker, you'll no doubt come out with warped widgets. They won't be able to do what a widget is supposed to do (whatever that might be). By the same token, the power of speech -- the mouth -- is the machinery that manufactures prayers. If you abuse that power to insult people, gossip or lie, you damage the mouth's ability to create something pure and spiritual that will be capable of making its way to Heaven. If you know that these kinds of speech are common grist for your verbal mill, working on improving this aspect of your personality could be one of the most important resolutions you make as you head into Yom Kippur.
- **Sometimes, the compounded interest of prayer is forwarded.** Every time you come to God with a sincere prayer, you place a deposit in your Heavenly account. Your soul attains a little more light. You gain, whether or not you see your petition answered. What happens to that accrued merit? Sometimes, God knows that it will be needed later, and He waits for that time. The prayer you say today may help you ten years from now. It may help your children, or even your grandchildren, in a way that you could never help them when that time comes.
- **In perspective, the vast majority of our prayers are answered every day.** It's an amazing aspect of human nature that we focus on what's missing. You take your children to Fun Time indoor amusement park/arcade that costs you about \$1 a minute. They have hours of fun. Then, just before they leave, they get to redeem their prize tickets for a selection of cheap plastic toys that probably cost .0003 cents apiece to make. Little Susie is five tickets short for the mini-notepad she wants, and she spends the entire ride home crying over her fate. What about the two hours of pure happiness? What about the \$120 you just spent for her pleasure? Forget it all. It's what didn't happen that counts most to little Suzie.

Although we would like to think of ourselves as having evolved from the level of little Susie, we are not as evolved as we might believe. Do we have any idea what could happen to us every day that doesn't? How many microbes do we inhale that don't infect us? How many crazy drivers do we pass on the highway that don't crash into us? What about all the gifts God lavishes upon us every day? Isn't the ability to walk, think, breathe, and to appreciate beauty, flavor, music and humor the answer to our prayers? Aren't the people who love us the answer to our prayers? If we lived in a war-torn nation, wouldn't we understand that the relative peace within our borders, and the freedom in which we live are answers to our prayers?

And yet, these gifts do not necessarily take the edge off an urgent need. When someone tells a desperately poor person, "At least you have your health," that

doesn't pay the bills or remove the unbearable pressure under which the person lives. What this perspective does do, however, is confirm that everything that comes to us, pleasant or not, comes from a wellspring of love and kindness.

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