



The Efficacy of Prayer

Does Prayer Work?

RABBI ARYEH BEN DAVID

Does prayer work?
Is it efficacious?

Garrison Keillor, the American storyteller, writes of a mythic town called Lake Wobegon, where “all the children are above average.” Perhaps it would be nice to live in such a place. Unfortunately, it is mythic. Still, we often yearn to live in such make-believe places and lead make-believe lives. I do.

People ask, “How is everything?” and I respond, “Great, fine, thank God.” It is so easy to escape from our realities, to deny our realities, to become strangers to ourselves and to our souls. Is everything really “Great, fine”?

I am fifty-four years old, and for a fair portion of my life I have lived in Lake Wobegon. I pretended that everything was fine—work, family, health, livelihood. Why? What compelled me to live a fairy tale? Sometimes the fear of things not being perfect was too

frightening for me. Often I was playing a role. People looked at me as “the teacher,” “the rabbi.” As a community role model and a representative of Torah I thought that I had to have answers and my life had to be exemplary.

Prayer brought me back to reality. Prayer brought me back to myself, to the inner chamber of my soul. Prayer introduced me to the life that I was actually leading, rather than the life I thought I was supposed to lead.

Noted Israeli rabbi Dr. Eliezer Berkovits writes that “it is the need alone that God desires.... Prayer is a cry. It is not a memo, a list of things I want, a liturgical recitation. It is a cry of my most needful needs.”¹

Why do I cry out? Will my heart-wrenching yearnings be fulfilled? Will I receive answers for my longings?

Maybe, maybe not.

But this is not really the goal. I call out because I need to call out. Because life, with all of its wonder and beauty, can also be devastating. Because there are failures and insecurities, doubts and disappointments. I need to encounter and express my vulnerabilities, my failures, my shortcomings, my worries. I do not want to lead a fake life. I want to live a life of personal integrity, wholly accessing all of my being.

With whom can I do this? With whom can I call out, without hesitation or concern of being judged or disregarded? With whom can I express the fragility of my life? With my friends? When they ask, “How are you doing?” can I reply, “I think I have failed one of my children, my body is showing worrisome signs, my wife and I seem to be missing each other, and I have an overall feeling of dread”? Will my friends ever ask me again?

With my wife? I have been married for almost thirty years. My wife is one of the world’s great listeners, nonjudgmental and loving. Yet when and how can I bare my soul without qualification or second-thought? How often? Is she ready to hear me at precisely the moment I need to unburden myself?

I have a relationship with God, a personal relationship. God knows where I am.

In fifth-grade Sunday school they taught me that God was omniscient. That was a pretty big word for a ten-year-old. I had no idea what they meant. But now it comes back to me. God knows. God already knows. And precisely because God already knows, I can cry out.

There is no embarrassment—God already knows. There is no shame—God already knows.

I call out to escape being held prisoner in Lake Wobegon. To stop being a stranger to my own soul.

I call out to God from the deepest inner chamber of my being, expressing my greatest fears, disappointments, failures, worries, anxieties—not in order to have my problems solved, not in order to receive something, but in order to fully encounter myself. If I cannot admit this and articulate this, then I am held in the perpetual captivity of denial.

Rabbi Berkovits writes that we need to “tumble into the presence of God.”² Not enter or stand in the presence. Not even be in the presence. We need to tumble. Imagine for a moment that it is a beautiful day and you are standing on the top of a grassy hill. You throw up your hands and tumble down. How did it feel?

Free. Scary. Out-of-control. Exhilarating. Joyful. Bouncy and dirty. Losing breath and laughing.

In the synagogue during prayer, at certain points I will simply put the prayer book down, take a deep breath, and tumble. I will ask, “Okay, Aryeh, where are you really? There are so many gifts, so many things to be thankful for, life itself. And there are also demons and fears. And struggles—that I have faced and I have lost. Where are you?” And I tumble. It is not scripted. I never know where I am going and if it will hurt. It is free and scary and exhilarating. And sometimes I feel like I have grass stains on my soul. But precisely because I lose control and do not try to censor my words, it is authentic.

And like a child running to a parent, a lover in the arms of a beloved confidante, suddenly the fears and struggles do not seem as daunting.

A while ago my wife and I decided to have a special night and go out to a romantic restaurant. We made all of the arrangements, went out, and—it was closed. All dressed up and with nowhere to go, we ended up getting a piece of pizza and sitting on a park bench. And—it was fine. Because with my wife, with the depth, honesty, and love of this relationship, it is really just about being together, candlelight or pizza.

So it is for me with prayer. I have a relationship with God. It is an intimate relationship. I know there are many people for whom the songs and the dancing enhance the quality of prayer. I am not one of them. In any synagogue, at any time, I can find the moment to put down the prayer book and open the inner chamber of my being. I can tumble into the presence of God.

I imagine that it would have been nice to have lived in Lake Wobegon. I still like to think that my children are above average.

But living my own authentic, struggling life is a very powerful place to be. Prayer has offered me a unique opportunity to witness my own struggles, to encounter my own soul, and to live with God as my confidante.

For me, it works.

Choosing Life: Prayer and Healing

RABBI ANNE BRENER, LCSW

One day recently, I struggled with painful aftereffects of chemotherapy. My most life-sustaining efforts, walking and writing, felt challenged.

That morning I hobbled downstairs, holding tight to the banister. I sat on the couch and read a book of blessings made for me at a rabbinical conference when my cancer was first diagnosed. My friend Riqi decorated a scrapbook and left it for attendees to inscribe with prayers and wishes on my behalf. I read their words, as well as

the prayers and blessings of others, written on ribbons and cards, which decorate my home. I pictured the friends, acquaintances, and strangers who have sent me these loving acknowledgments. Then I read the latest edition of *The Outstretched Arm*, a publication of the National Jewish Healing Center, which explored the theme of Shabbat and healing. The words soothed me. When I came to the end of the publication, I realized that, for the entire time I had been reading, I had not been aware of my pain.

Recently a study was released asserting that prayer does not work. Skeptics were emboldened. “You see,” they said smugly. But those of us who have basked in the glow of prayers, rested on their wings, been buoyed by the love they convey are not deterred. We know that while prayer may not effect a permanent cure, it can certainly bring healing. That healing may only last a second or be more enduring. But it is healing just the same. Prayer often enables us to change tracks when we feel pain. Our focus diverted, perhaps only briefly, we align with relief. This brings us closer to a *refuah shleimah*, a complete healing. This morning’s reading, which transported me into a zone of healing, was a lot like praying. To paraphrase Rabbi Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi, it was less of a vending machine experience (you put in your prayer and get what you prayed for) and more of a flight path experience (you are transported into another place).

Prayer may or may not involve God. I pray when I glance at the *Mi Sheberach* list on my computer desktop and feel connected to those for whom I wish healing. I am soothed by the knowledge that there are people praying for me. I breathe more deeply, and on that breath, there is relief. When my kitty purrs, our connection feels like prayer. Each gaze at my daughter is a prayer.

Liturgical prayer can be an affirmation of faith such as the statement of the weekday *Amidah*, which requests of God, “Heal us and we will be healed,” or the *Mi Sheberach* [prayer for healing], where God is named as the one who heals both body [*refuat ba-guf*] and soul [*refuat ba-nefesh*]. Prayer can also be a response to the liturgy—not just a positive one. Recently, during the morning

service, I had difficulty rising on my toes as we said “*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* [Holy, holy, holy]” during the *Kedushah* prayer. I cried out in my heart, “Is this what You want? That I’m not even capable of properly praising your name?”

My expression of desperation and anger as a form of prayer is consistent with ancient Jewish understanding. There is a midrash in which Rabbi Johanan used ten words to describe prayer, many of them taken from the biblical description of the emotional state of the Hebrews trapped in the depths of slavery.³ Those words are *cry, lament, groan, sing, encounter, trouble, call, fall, pray, and supplicate*. Almost all of those were present in the question rising from my pain.

As I came upstairs to write, my feet hurt less. Expressing how I felt, I prayed with my fingers and, as I typed, my fingers felt less pain. Sometimes prayer tricks me. After complaining about my situation, the pain seemed miraculously ameliorated. I was embarrassed, thinking that in my crying out I had been overdramatic. I feared burdening those who care for me. Forgive me, if your prayers work. And thank you to all of you who have sent blessings or prayers on behalf of myself. They sustain me.

Why Pray?

RABBI RAMI SHAPIRO

I’m new to prayer. True, I was raised on Davvenen and *tefillin*, and I have spent a lifetime reading aloud to God from a Siddur, but prayer—actually talking to God—was reserved for emotional foxholes and college finals.

For me, God is Reality, everything that was, is, and will be. God is not a being but Being itself. God is *Ehiyeh asher Ehiyeh* (Exodus 3:14): not the fixed and static “I Am That I Am,” but the fluid, creative, unbounded “I Will Be What I Will Be” that burns through theological speculation and leaves the seeker in a joyous freefall of not-knowing.

I had no need to pray to God, for there was no Other “out there” to whom to pray. Meditation made more sense, and I took

that up with a vengeance. Yet after decades of sitting on cushions and, as I got older, chairs, I felt called to pray. Something was missing in the silence of meditation. While formal prayer was for me a musical score without rests, and hence merely noise, meditation had become a score without notes, and hence merely quiet. I valued the silence, but I wanted the sound. I wanted to talk to God, yet having for so long focused on the nondual No-thing, I just couldn't talk to the supremely dualistic Something.

All that changed in the late 1990s when God began talking to me. "If I am truly nondual as you claim, then I am Other as well as Self, the Many as well as the One, the Wave as well as the Ocean. Do not proclaim My creativity and then imprison Me in your lack of it."

I actually heard this. I was experimenting with Reb Nachman of Breslov's *bitbodedut* practice, isolating myself with God for an hour or more each day, and pouring my heart out about every aspect of my life. I did this for weeks before I heard what the ancient rabbis called *Bat Kol*, the Daughter's Voice, an auditory meeting with God. For me, the Voice was clearly female, and it heralded an encounter with *Shechinah*, the feminine Presence of God, that led me to the Divine Feminine, God as Mother.

"You see, Sweetheart, if I am all things, I am self and other, and that which transcends them both. Don't see me in the tree—see me as the tree. Don't see me in yourself—see me as your self. I am both formless nonduality and the splendor and gore of infinite variety. When you sit in silence and your story fades, you and I fade as well, leaving only formless bliss. But when you pray, chant, and talk to Me, you and I arise together to chat. The silence is true, and so is the talk. Just don't be attached to either."

So began my daily conversations with God, the Divine Mother, an all-embracing presence whose unconditional love burns away the self-serving dramas of my life and leaves me without defenses or hideouts. Her answer to my prayers is always the same: "Sweetheart, drop the drama and look at the truth, then you will know what to do, even if you choose not to do it. Here, let me help you."

God's help is rarely pleasant. Having my story wrenched from my grasp, being stripped naked emotionally and intellectually and forced to see what *is* rather than what I so desperately want there to be, is humbling and often terrifying, and always profoundly liberating. And it is done with such love and compassion that in the end I fall into Her arms in selfless surrender.

"I won't clean up the messes you make," She tells me, Her voice always soft, compelling, and (sometimes frighteningly) inescapable. "And I will be with you while you make them and with you while you unmake them. I will never condemn you, but I will laugh at you. Learn to laugh with me and you won't make so many messes in the first place."

I think the Mother and laughter go together. Sarah laughed and denied it (Genesis 18:12). She named her son Laughter (Isaac) but feared when he played with Man-of-God (Ishmael; Genesis 21:9). In this she brought much suffering to the world, a suffering that lingers even now. In her shame and fear she taught us how to fall from grace, and hence how to return to it as well. Recovering laughter and learning to play is key to spiritual maturation. But today's religion and formal prayer leave little room for play.

At its best religion is myth, jazz, poetry, and play. We make it up, and it makes us up, and in this sacred invention is the possibility of discovering that God is all. But when we take it too seriously we rob ourselves of joy, lose all hope of discovery, and suck the very life out of faith. It is like graduating from stickball to the major leagues; the game is no longer played but managed. We boo and cheer but we no longer laugh.

It is the same in the prayer services I experience in synagogues around the country. Everything is so serious, scripted, and safe. There are no surprises. We know exactly what is coming and what to do when it comes. We call out that God is one (*Adonai ehad*) and rarely notice that God is the very one sitting next to us and in front of us and behind us. We say that God's love is unending (*ahavah rabbah*) yet never let it sear away the narcissism and self-pity that fuels the false self we insist upon calling "me."

I value synagogue and liturgy for the community they offer, but when it is God I seek, my shul is the forest, my liturgy the chanting of Her Names, and my prayer the unscripted dialogue of Psalms 42:7: deep calling to deep.

Praying with the Divine Flow

RABBI MIKE COMINS

Growing up, my Jewish experience was very positive, but it was ethnic, not religious. I liked Hebrew; as a high school student I worked hard to free Soviet Jews; I fell in love with Israel and moved there at age twenty-six. I stayed for fifteen years.

Prayer was always part of my Jewish life. I was a Reform Movement youth-program junkie, and that's what we Reform Jews did. I loved the singing services at summer camp. I had powerful moments of prayer with groups in Sinai at the Western Wall. And I remember wonderful davenning with my housemates at the Jewish co-op at UCLA. Praying alone in the Sierra, with a minyan of mountains and stars, I was moved to tears.

And yet I had no *personal* connection with God through prayer. So much so that when I interviewed for rabbinical school, I declared that I would never be a pulpit rabbi, as that would be hypocritical. I wanted a rabbinic education to become a better Jewish educator.

I must have had a connection with something, however, because in Israel I davenned regularly, sometimes three times a day when I was at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. My home in Israel was Congregation Kol HaNeshama, a Reform synagogue in Jerusalem, where services were always spirited and moving. I loved how it felt. Praying was definitely an entryway into holiness. Transcendence was happening.

But a dialogue with God? *Nada*. The personal God my friends believed in, Orthodox and Reform alike, was not a possibility. For me, the Siddur was like a passport or an entry ticket, not much more. I didn't believe the theology. I liked the meanings of some