



What Is Prayer?

It's very surprising for people to learn that very few rabbis, Jewish philosophers, or theologians really have a conventional view of prayer, namely, that we ask for something and God gives it to us, or doesn't. It's really striking. The Kabbalists have all kinds of ways in which prayer can have an effect, but not the standard "you speak and God listens" model. Likewise in the philosophical tradition, and even in the rabbinic tradition. In the last two thousand years, reflective Jewish religious thought actually does not give a lot of space to what 99 percent of us would immediately assume is the point of prayer.

JAY MICHAELSON

As we read in the previous chapter, the question of whether or not prayer works depends on what a person believes about God and God's relation to the universe. While this is not a book about theology, we cannot discuss prayer without acknowledging that it means different things to different people.

"Conventional" prayer, to adopt Jay Michaelson's term, is the presumed traditional take on the world. We pray to change God's mind, for God has the power and desire to intervene in the

world. This view is represented in *Making Prayer Real*, and not only by Orthodox Jews. At the opposite end of the spectrum, usually mystics and contemplatives (including the rationalist, philosophic variety), God does not possess at least one of the “all” attributes that make the suffering of the innocent so problematic: all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present (past, present, and future), and all-good. God lacks either the decision-making kind of mind we humans possess, or the desire to intervene in the course of the world, or the ability to do so. For them, prayer is directed at the human heart, the only place it can affect. Others take a middle position of one sort or another, believing that prayer indeed aims to change humans, but this has a cosmic effect on the world and on God, who does have the power to intervene in worldly affairs. This is the neo-Hasidic, mystical position that I accept. We shape the flow of divine energy in the world through the internal struggles of our hearts. Most of the teachers interviewed for this book accept some version of the latter two positions.

The purpose of this grossly oversimplified typology is to recognize that prayer takes different forms in Jewish tradition, drawing on different experiences and subsequent explanations of how God works in the world. But the differences should not be over-emphasized. When we turn to the main questions of this book—how prayer functions and what it tries to accomplish—there is a surprising amount of agreement. Even the mystics, who see no separation between themselves and God, find it useful to employ the second person “You” language of address that assumes a dualistic understanding of God as other. And of course, those who believe in the “conventional” take on prayer have no reason, or desire, to deny the effects of prayer on the human heart.

One way to get to the bottom of what prayer is, is to ask, what does prayer do?

All prayer—when we pay attention, whether personal or liturgical—is ultimately a form of speaking the truth. It makes us

aware of what is going on in our lives in this moment—so that we can see clearly and respond appropriately.

RABBI JONATHAN P. SLATER

Prayer changes and affects the person who prays because prayer opens the heart. Prayer lets down the barriers between our intimate longings, our private pain, our anxious clutching fears, and everything else. The very interiority of a prayer experience (even a prayer as brief as “Wow”) opens and exposes our tender hearts.

RABBI SHERYL LEWART

Underneath its stated intentions of praising, thanking, or beseeching God, underneath its functional goals of fulfilling our religious obligations, spurring us to action, bringing us comfort in times of stress, improving our character traits, or bonding with the historical and the present Jewish community, prayer is first and foremost a spiritual practice that lays the foundation for attaining any of the above. In its essence, prayer is the practice of becoming more aware and more compassionate. It is a way of speaking truth and opening the heart.

How does prayer accomplish this task? Particularly for those who do not hold a traditional theology, we must ask, how does prayer actually work?

Aligning with God

I like the Leona Medina image. If you saw somebody pulling a boat to the shore and were mistaken about mechanics and motion, you might think that he was pulling the shore to the boat. And that’s what prayer is like. You think that you’re pulling God to you, but in fact, if you pray well, you pull yourself to God.

RABBI DAVID J. WOLPE

For most, particularly the mystics, prayer is understood as a method to attune or align ourselves with God.

Prayer can be taking that contemplative moment before a meal or a boardroom meeting. We can say to ourselves, “I’m going to take a moment and center myself—what am I about to do and why?” In this moment we are locating a self often buried under the mundane. Prayer gets us in touch with that deeper self.

RABBI SHAWN ZEVIT

The one who prays is like the shofar. The shofar itself has no independent significance or power. It is only meaningful when someone blows into it. The sound that emerges is recognized and has a meaning. We are the shofar—and it is God who moves through us, “blows” on us to generate the prayer that emerges. Thus, prayer is the closing of a circle, the making of a connection between self and Self, creating a united whole.

RABBI JONATHAN P. SLATER

One method of aligning with God is to change our usual perspective and bring attention to matters of the holy.

What prayer means to me is turning myself so that I’m no longer the center of the story. I’m reminded of that kid’s book *Zoom*, where you start out looking at a farmhouse, and then you go back and see that it’s really a picture on a wall in a room, and then you go back further and see the room is in a house, and further and further until eventually, you’re seeing this from “God’s perspective.” And suddenly, the universe is completely different and the place of that farmhouse is a completely different story. At my best, prayer is about getting out of my own way and, as much as possible, trying to see the world for a moment through the metaphoric eyes of God.

RABBI LAURA GELLER

Practically speaking, the most important way to examine a religious question is, “How does this actually work?” Prayer

is a spiritual technology. It changes the heart. Before prayer, we might be thinking about business relationships or the mortgage or whatever else, and then during prayer, our mind is turned, either by a formal liturgy or our own intentions, to other subjects more essential, more real. The mind has been cleansed in a way. I like to joke that prayer is the original mental floss.

JAY MICHAELSON

You Cannot *Think* God

None of the teachers interviewed see prayer as an intellectual experience.

If you ask most people, it's the sound of the prayers and the music of them and not the cognitive content, and frankly, although we comment on them all the time, the cognitive content of many prayers is not so impressive. Other parts of the tradition are much more impressive. It affirms certain beliefs, but it's not supposed to be intellectually tantalizing. That's not the purpose of it. In fact, if it were, it would sort of defeat the purpose of it.

RABBI DAVID J. WOLPE

Indeed, the liturgist uses words and concepts, as does the poet, not to convey information but to evoke emotion, to both embody and celebrate the Divine-human relationship.

I'm not trying to understand the words. I'm trying to be the words.

RABBI SHEFA GOLD

I don't pray to God with my prayers. I experience God through my prayers, with my community. When my voice is joining with twenty other people's voices, chanting the *Amidah*, I

experience God through that moment. I'm not praying to God for something to happen.

RABBI JAMIE KORNGOLD

The *Is* and *Ought* of Prayer

So little of Jewish prayer is actually asking for things, especially on Shabbat, when most attend synagogue services. What do we want when we pray?

I'm davenning to not want anything. Not davenning to want what I don't have, but to want what I already have. And so prayer becomes an hour of gratitude practice and a sense of being able to be with the real and come out of my antagonistic posturing to what has been given. A softening to what is, so that I can be with what is.

RABBI DAVID INGBER

In this sense, prayer is a true source of peace. It helps us to accept what we might prefer to deny. But at other times, the same honesty and acceptance that lead to equanimity goad us to rebel against the way things are.

Prayer isn't only comforting, it's also disturbing. It can stir up parts of you that are more comfortable left dormant. That's not always easy. I think that one of the reasons to shy away from prayer is that you don't want to hear that part of yourself and prayer brings it out.

RABBI DAVID J. WOLPE

This, too, is prayer, a point usually missed, and certainly not advertised in the synagogue bulletin. Real spiritual practice is often painful, particularly at the beginning, when we have the courage and honesty to see ourselves in our folly as if for the first time. An open heart is not only more receiving of love; it is more sensitive to pain, especially our own.

Dr. Heschel writes that embarrassment and shame are what hold us back from praying our deepest prayers. For me, the point of spiritual practice is to keep dancing on our own edge. As we practice, we can look for where we've fallen into a place of comfortability. What might we still be afraid of expressing or ashamed of showing?

RABBI DIANE ELLIOT

Authentic Prayer Is Dangerous

When prayer works, we see the world and ourselves with increased clarity. One way to remain in denial about our deficiencies is to rationalize our current state as the way things should be. Paradoxically, sometimes to accept what is, is to accept that we need to change. Real prayer is not complacent.

I'm unimpressed by the idea that prayer is just to make you feel good or feel better. Prayer is also supposed to challenge you. I appreciate the quote, "Prayer comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable." I like that a lot. There's often too much emphasis on feeling good. It's all about changing yourself in order to change the world. When you walk out a better person, prayer works.

CANTOR ELLEN DRESKIN

Rabbi Ethan Franzel brings a mystic's perspective to prayer.

The Baal Shem Tov talks about the body and prayer. Just as in the act of lovemaking there needs to be a friction, there needs to be movement to generate the heat and the passion, so the body needs to be involved in prayer as well. Lovemaking is really an act of intimacy, of knowing another, of merging as close as you can, literally, physically. Spiritually speaking, the act of giving yourself up, of subsuming your identity, of throwing your lot in with who you truly are, which is God, is

the most intimate act that you can do, which is why it's so scary.

RABBI ETHAN FRANZEL

Genuine prayer is honest, and when we're honest, we do not know what we will uncover. We do not know which emotions will be triggered, or what insight may come. But in community, human or divine, we need not feel alone to face the music.

Often prayer is simply a sigh of release, an acknowledgment that we are not always in charge of our lives. A feeling of accompaniment rather than abandonment invites us to share intimacies and probe the dark places. As we sense the presence of a loving, nonjudging, patient soulmate, we grow in optimism and confidence. No matter how difficult the situation, we recognize the psalmist's words as our own. "Even though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, You are with me" [Psalms 23:4].

RABBI SHERYL LEWART

Prayer as Spiritual Practice

We end this chapter by restating the premise of this book. Prayer comes alive when we take responsibility for our own inner lives.

I would suggest that we need to reconceive prayer as not about addressing the Divine Being with praise and requests. Rather, we should see prayer and the time set aside for prayer as time devoted to our spiritual work. It is time for reflection, a precious gift to ourselves amidst our busy lives. The liturgy should remind us:

1. There is something larger than ourselves in the universe—what many of us call God. It is an important perspective that also reminds us that we are not alone.

2. It should be a time to reflect on the spiritual issues in our lives. To think about how to improve my ethical qualities to be more like the person I deeply desire to be.
3. It is an opportunity to express gratitude for the blessings in our lives—most of all the blessing of life itself.

This is in fact a reconstruction of the traditional forms of rabbinic prayer: *shevah* (praise), *bakasha* (request), *hoda'ah* (thanks). Reframing *bakasha* as focusing on spiritual growth rather than asking God for things is a critical redefining of prayer.¹

RABBI MICHAEL STRASSFELD

One reason prayer is difficult is because we don't know what we're doing. I'm not talking about Siddur literacy or synagogue skills. Most of us are unfamiliar with our own internal dynamics as pray-ers. One way to understand prayer is that it is a transformation of consciousness. So we need to ask ourselves, "Where are we starting from? Where are we trying to go? What are the prayer strategies or practices that we know from experience are likely to take us there?"

Prayer needs to be understood as a spiritual *practice* just as we might understand the practice of meditation or yoga. But in order to do this, we need to know what we're practicing *toward*, what we're practicing *for*. We need skilled guides and teachers to help us. We need patience, determination, and faith in the practice. And we need to know if, over time, we're making any progress.

RABBI NANCY FLAM

The rest of *Making Prayer Real* is devoted to meeting the challenge that Rabbi Flam has set before us. With our community of teachers, we turn now to the spiritual dynamics of the practice of prayer.

