

How to Find Meaning in Prayer

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By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon
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Abstract: "The primary purposes of prayer, Jewishly understood, are to change God and no less to change oneself, to help us become better human beings. In the Jewish spiritual understanding, prayer is multi-directional: it is both outer directed toward God and inner directed toward us...so, even if you are an agnostic, even if you are an atheist, prayer can still be an immensely valuable and beneficial enterprise."

Many of us have trouble with prayer. Some doubt whether anyone is listening. Some doubt whether prayer is efficacious. Some people think of prayer as a passive, helpless kind of act. The English word "prayer" and the infinitive "to pray" come from the French "prier." Does anyone know what "prier" means? It means "to beg." No wonder some of us have problems with prayer. We don't like to think of ourselves as begging.

But all these and other objections to prayer can be overcome once we learn the true Jewish understanding of prayer. What is the Hebrew word for prayer? The Hebrew word for prayer is "*tefillah*." It is derived from the Hebrew infinitive "*lehitpallel*" which means "to know oneself." Judaism's approach to prayer is inherently contemplative and introspective. The primary purposes of prayer, Jewishly understood, are to change God and no less to change oneself, to help us become better human beings. In the Jewish spiritual understanding, prayer is multi-directional: it is both outer directed toward God and inner directed toward us.

So now we understand why Rabbi Morris Adler would say, "Our prayers are answered not when we are given what we ask, but when we are challenged to be what we can be." Now we appreciate why George Meredith would write "Those who rise from prayer better persons, their prayers are answered." So, even if you are an agnostic, even if you are an atheist, prayer can still be an immensely valuable and beneficial enterprise.

How does prayer help us to become better human beings? Prayer is like a flashlight illuminating our core values as individuals and as a community. Rabbi Barry Cytron observes, "The liturgy of our tradition is a stimulus and a guide. It calls us to attention. It reminds us of the vast range of concerns in our faith, of its moral and spiritual claims on our lives. It sensitizes us to our world and our place within it. For many of us, the liturgy gives expression to words that those of us who are not poets could never express as beautifully. At other times, it gives voice to values that we might have permitted to fall by the side, to teachings which we must dust off from the bookshelves of our faith and place once more inside our lives. The great theologian of our generation, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, often spoke of prayer as a 'flashlight,' as a beacon of light thrown into the darkness, by which we are shown how to walk, whose rays help us grope toward a better world. It is, I believe, a perfect metaphor for prayer. For in a world that often seems so dark, prayer can illuminate, pointing us to our best values and our greatest dreams;

moreover, by urging us to pray in community, it continually teaches us that our ultimate hope for a better world must emerge when we reach out to one another.”

Prayer reminds us what we stand for. Prayer leads to action. Prayer inspires us to convert our values into deeds. Rabbi Marc Israel writes, “The faith we have been bequeathed and which it is our privilege to bequeath to our children, and they to theirs, is not a contemplative faith. There is study, to be sure, and there is ritual and there is prayer; there is solace and there is wonder. All these matter, they matter profoundly. But in the end, it is not the services that we attend that will sustain us; it is the services we perform. For us, Shabbat was never meant as a stopping place; it was meant as a resting place, a place to regather our energies to take up again, and forever, God’s work in this world.” Let there be no prayer that does not become a deed!

Prayer is not a helpless, passive act. In fact, prayer is a rebellion against the status quo. Prayer cultivates our sense of appreciation and gratitude.

According to the Talmud, we should endeavor to recite 100 blessings a day. Why? So that we take nothing for granted and truly savor the blessings of our lives. As products of university training, all of us have become very skilled at critique and analysis, and taking ideas - and sometimes people - apart. Prayer teaches us how to put things - and people - back together. Prayer reminds us of other necessary skills: how to feel appreciation and how to express praise. We live in an era of entitlement. Prayer nurtures our sense of appreciation and gratitude for the blessings of our lives. Prayer teaches us how to give praise.

In recent years, researchers have found that prayer has therapeutic benefits. Prayer helps us control our minds, rather than let our minds control us. Prayer helps us to overcome the Zeigarnik effect, the mind’s hot-wired propensity for negativity. Prayer has the capacity to reduce stress and anxiety and to increase calm, well-being, optimism, and creativity. Psychologist Leonard Felder reports that “As a psychotherapist and reform Jew, I began experimenting with Jewish prayers to see if they could help my clients and myself respond more effectively to such issues as procrastination, distractibility, stress, anxiety, and personal setbacks. During these years, more than 250 clients have tried daily prayer and meditation, and about 70% of them have reported a significant gain in their sense of well-being and personal effectiveness.”

Prayer is good medicine

So I hope I’ve succeeded in giving you a new perspective on prayer. Underscoring my point, Leonard Felder observes, “I hope that if you, too, have been held back by personal frustrations with parts of Judaism, or by bad experiences with people who were not living up to their spiritual values, or by a professor or other role model who told you that atheism was more courageous than prayer – that you will consider reexamining the power and the intelligence found in prayers that are meant to stir up rebelliousness and our strengths. Even though most people go through their entire lives without knowing the deeper meanings of the prayers that are recited each day by millions of Jews, I hope you will take the time to find out what these prayers have to say about courage, renewal, and commitment to doing good. You may find that even some of the prayers you never took seriously are in fact an important source of strength and clarity for making each day count.”

Understood in the way that I suggest, prayer will help you live your values and not just pay lip service to them. Above all, prayer can help you to become a more aware human being, a more awake human being, a more sensitive human being.

Having said this, I would add one more point. Not only can prayer be meaningful. Prayer is of consequence. A prayer life really matters. And this is the reason why.

Our world is characterized by war and hatred. Our minds are controlled by anger and unresolved grief. The Dalai Lama writes, "If humanity is to survive, happiness and inner balance are crucial ... to achieve a deeper level of happiness we cannot neglect our inner development. The calamity of 9/11 demonstrated that modern technology and human intelligence guided by hatred can lead to immense destruction. Such terrible acts are a violent symptom of an afflicted mental state. To respond wisely and effectively, we need to be guided by more healthy states of mind, not just to avoid feeling the flames of hatred, but to respond skillfully. We would do well to remember that the war against hatred and terror can be waged on this, the internal front, too."

Humanity will never reach the next level of evolution until we learn how to better control our minds. And the way we learn to control our minds is through a prayer life.

"Rather than being a passive act or a withdrawal from the world," writes psychologist Leonard Felder, "Jewish prayer is a way of waking up the soul, clarifying the mind, and summoning up strength for doing good in the world."