

# How To Develop A Meaningful Prayer Life: Part One

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By Rabbi Stuart Gershon  
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*Abstract: If you don't believe God exists, if you don't think God is listening to your prayers, then fine: Keep God out of your expectations concerning prayer. But keep on praying! Develop a prayer life and come to embrace different expectations. Because, our Jewish spiritual tradition teaches, even if prayer doesn't change God, prayer can surely change you!*

The theme of my teaching tonight is: How to develop a meaningful prayer life.

Inscribed on the portico at the lower entrance to our synagogue is a classic statement from Jewish tradition. Who has noticed what is written there?

It says: *al sheloshah devarim haolam omed: al ha Torah, ve al ha'avodah, ve al gemilut chasadim.* "The world stands upon three pillars: Torah, prayer and acts of lovingkindness."

For me this is not a quaint statement. It is saying there is something profoundly important about having a prayer life. Having a prayer life holds up the world. What does that mean? Let me tell you how I understand it.

At this stage of human evolution, our technological abilities to blow up the planet -- and ourselves along with it -- far outstrip our abilities to control our negative human emotions. Our reptile brain, as the anthropologists call it, still has so far to go. At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our minds are still so reactive -- so quick to respond with anger and hatred at even the slightest provocation. Have you ever seen road rage? Then you know what I'm talking about.

In this context the Dalai Lama has written, "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 feeding 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." The only way humanity will survive into the 22<sup>nd</sup> century is by reaching the next level of human evolution. And one way we will reach that next level of evolution is by developing more healthy states of mind. And one of the ways we develop more healthy states of mind is through a prayer life. In this sense, prayer truly does hold up the world.

Let's discuss the primary barriers to prayer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let's get them out on the table. What are they?

The barriers include:

- 1) Theological doubts
- 2) Objections to conventional prayer language
- 3) Aversion to petitionary prayer
- 4) Hebrew language
- 5) Life is just too busy, too distracting, for spiritual stuff
- 6) The lack of any religious background/upbringing
- 7) Awakening painful feelings

No doubt about it, these are significant barriers. And on your own, you might ask yourself, which is the biggest barrier for you. But these barriers can be overcome. For many of us, if not most of us, still have reasons and still find occasions to pray. So when we pray, why do we pray? What are some reasons for prayer? Why do we come to services when we come?

- 1) Prayer connects us with community
- 2) Prayer connects us to Jewish history/Jewish people – past, present, and future
- 3) Prayer connects us with our parents and grandparents
- 4) Prayer stops us from being so self-centered and makes us think about others
- 5) Prayer helps us to become better people, to develop a *lev tov*, a good heart
- 6) Prayer stops time

We give much more weight to the barriers to prayer than to its benefits. Despite all the well-known barriers, here is a very salient observation: prayer helps. Prayer connects.

It seems to me that one of the biggest barriers to prayer – and the point that I would most like you to take home tonight --is that our definition of prayer is far too narrow. When we think of prayer, we most often think of God, and we think of praising God or petitioning God for something.

Is that all prayer can be? Can prayer only be directed to God? Not if you know the Hebrew term for prayer. What is it? It is *tefillah*. *Tefillah* comes from the Hebrew infinitive *lehitpallel* which means “to know oneself.”

Jewishly understood, prayer is not uni-directional but multi-directional. Prayer is outer-directed toward God. Prayer is also inner-directed toward us. In other words, the definition of prayer should not be limited to praising God or asking God for things. Our definition of prayer needs to be more expansive, more open, to include reflection, introspection, contemplation, and meditation. This too is prayer.

So what's my point? My point is: if you don't believe God exists. If you don't think God is listening to your prayers. Then fine: keep God out of your expectations surrounding prayer. But keep on praying! Develop a prayer life and come to embrace different expectations. Because, our

Jewish spiritual tradition teaches, even if prayer doesn't change God, prayer can surely change you! And when prayer changes us, we can truly feel our prayers have been answered!

A prayer life is one of the ways we grow ourselves into more loving and compassionate and calm human beings. A prayer life is one of the ways we contribute to the course of human evolution. A prayer life matters. A prayer life is of consequence for the future of the world.

*Al sheloshah devarim haolam omed: al ha Torah, ve al ha'avodah, ve al gemilut chasadim.*

The world stands on three pillars: Torah, prayer and acts of lovingkindness.

Please come back on April 20, when I shall discuss how to develop a meaningful prayer life, part two – the sequel.