

How to Find New Meaning in Prayer

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Abstract: Most of us have been taught that the purpose of prayer is to communicate with God, to talk to God. This is absolutely one of the primary purposes of prayer, but it's not the sole purpose. As Judaism understands it, an equally primary purpose of prayer is to help us become better human beings. In Jewish spiritual understanding, prayer is multi-directional: it is both outer-directed toward God and inner-directed toward us.

The focus of my teaching tonight is: "How to find new meaning in prayer."

For many of us, prayer is problematic. Some doubt whether anyone is listening. Some doubt whether prayer is efficacious. Some of us don't like what the prayers say. Some of us feel shut out because we don't understand the Hebrew language.

No doubt about it, these are substantial barriers to prayer. But these barriers can be overcome. For many of us, if not most of us, still find reasons and occasions to pray. For when we pray, we find that prayer helps us to become better people, to develop a *lev tov*, a good heart; prayer stops us from being so self-centered, it makes us think about others; prayer connects us with our parents and grandparents; prayer connects us to Jewish generations that have come before us.

So, despite all the well-known barriers to prayer, here is a very salient observation: prayer helps. Prayer connects. Prayer does have value. It's just that in our modern secular world we have been indoctrinated to give more weight to the barriers to prayer than to its benefits.

Now let me share with you our Jewish spiritual understanding of the purpose of prayer. And I believe this understanding will be very meaningful to you and has the potential to transform your attitude toward 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."

Most of us have been taught that the sole purpose of prayer is to communicate with God, to talk to God. This is absolutely one of the primary purposes of prayer but it's not the sole purpose. As Judaism understands it, the equally primary purpose of prayer is to help us become better human beings. In 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.” Prayer is one of the most noble ways we human beings have to grow ourselves into more loving, compassionate, and calm human beings.

But does prayer really help each of us become a better human being? Yes, it does. Prayer reminds us of our core values. Prayer reminds you what you stand for. Prayer inspires us to convert our values into deeds. Prayer leads you to action. Prayer reminds us not to get too carried away by our 21st century ethic of entitlement. Prayer cultivates your sense of appreciation and gratitude for the blessings that are yours.

Now what are the implications of this alternative way of thinking about prayer?

First we come to appreciate that prayer is not a helpless, passive act. In fact, prayer is a rebellion against the status quo. “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.”

Second, we come to understand that prayer plays a significant role in human survival and evolution. The only way humanity will not blow itself up, but survive into the 22nd century and beyond is by reaching the next level of human evolution. But humanity will never reach that next level until we learn how to control our negative human emotions. Prayer is one of the ways we learn to control our minds. Prayer contributes to the course of human evolution.

Third, at its best, prayer is not about asking God to do things or give us things. Prayer is a spiritual vehicle for contemplation and introspection.

Fourth, and finally, we come to understand that even if we consider ourselves an agnostic or even an atheist when it comes to God, prayer is still an immensely valuable and beneficial activity. Prayer can help you to become a more aware human being, a more awake human being, a more sensitive human being.

Let me put this another way. If you don’t believe there is a God, then fine, keep God out of your expectations surrounding prayer. But that doesn’t mean to rule out prayer. It means rather to adopt a powerful new expectation of prayer, namely: **Even if prayer doesn’t change God, prayer can surely change you!**