



Prayer: The Work of the Heart

In the Jewish Oral Tradition it is said that the world stands on three pillars: *Torah* (Bible study), work, and acts of kindness. We can easily understand what the Jewish sages meant when they talked about studying God's Word and serving others. But when they spoke of "work," they meant a particular kind of work.

The sages weren't referring to going to a workplace or out in a field to earn our sustenance. What they were referencing is what Judaism calls "work of the heart." In Deuteronomy 11:13, we are directed to "serve him with all your heart." The sages teach that the way we serve God with all our heart is through prayer. In Judaism, prayer is the "work of the heart."

Defining prayer as heart-based work is profoundly different than how we typically define prayer. Prayer is a word that originated from the Latin word "to beg" or "to entreat." And for many people, both Christians and Jews, that is exactly how they view prayer. When we pray, we ask God for what we want and hope that He obliges.

However, when we change the definition of prayer to "work we do in our hearts," the act of praying changes dramatically. It becomes an act that transforms who we are, not what God does. Accordingly, the Hebrew word which means "to pray," *l'hitpalell*, is a reflexive verb which implies that we are doing something to ourselves.

Jewish prayer is composed of three main components—praise, gratitude, and requests. However, all three aspects have to be taken in the proper context.

We don't praise God because He needs our compliments. We don't thank God because He needs our gratitude. And we don't make requests because God doesn't know what we need. Rather, we do these things in order to change our hearts – to increase our awareness of God, to be more grateful for His blessings, and to become ever more cognizant of God as the source of all things.

Join us for this month's study as we explore prayer.



Photo: Chaim Goldberg/Flash90

*May these words of my mouth
and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight, LORD,
my Rock and my Redeemer.*

PSALM 19:14



Persistence in Prayer

Prayer is the most powerful force on earth. It has the power to save lives, reverse fortunes, achieve forgiveness, and bring about peace. But just how powerful is one prayer? Or 100 prayers? Or just one more prayer than we have already said?

In Genesis 25:21, we learn that Isaac had prayed to God on behalf of his childless wife Rebekah. In the same verse, we learn that God answered Isaac's prayer and Rebekah became pregnant. However, it wasn't as easy as it seems.

This wasn't the first time that Isaac had prayed for children, nor the second, nor the third. In fact, Isaac and Rebekah had been praying that same prayer for 19 years! And finally, their prayer was answered. This was a prayer marathon, not an easy sprint.

The Jewish sages offer the following advice: Pray to God over and over again just as a small child nags a parent until the parent can't take it anymore and finally gives in! Just as an earthly parent often gives in to a child's requests if pressed enough, so will our Heavenly Father answer our persistent requests provided, of course, our requests are for our good.

For Christians and Jews, this is often how prayer works in our own lives. Sometimes, we pour out our hearts to God and our prayers are answered immediately. However, more often than not, we don't get instant results. It's easy to give up after praying for the same thing over and over again, but we mustn't. The very next one may be the last one—the one that opens the door.

In the verse describing Isaac's prayer, the Hebrew word that means "to pray" can also mean "to dig." From that, we learn that praying is like digging—it hollows out a connecting tunnel between us and what we are praying for, but it takes time and patience. Just because we haven't reached our goal yet doesn't mean that nothing is happening; we are moving forward, we're just not there yet.

Sometimes all it takes is one prayer, and other times it takes just one more prayer.

But does this mean that God is like a pushover parent who gives in to our whining and nagging? Hardly! More than anything, King David wanted to build God an earthly home, the Temple, and begged God for that privilege. But when God told him no and that his son would be the one to build the Temple, David's heart changed and he did what he could to help his son accomplish this monumental task.

And that is the lesson here: It's not that we get God to change His mind by our repetitive prayers; it's that we change ourselves through our many prayers. We become closer to God and we learn to value what we pray for—be it health, sustenance, peace in our families, or the peace of Jerusalem.

We are transformed through prayer, and once we change, God can change anything.



© IFCJ

*I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.*

PSALM 40:1

Praying With Power

Is there a science to our prayers? Are some prayers more effective than others? According to Jewish tradition, the answer is yes.

A Jewish folktale is told about an orphaned boy who spent most of his childhood working as a shepherd. One day, he met some people on their way to spend the Yom Kippur holiday with a holy rabbi. The boy decided to join them even though he had no idea how to pray. He couldn't even read! On Yom Kippur night, one of the holiest times of the Jewish year, the boy saw everyone around him praying fervently, and he wanted to pray, too. He drew in a deep breath and let out a shrill whistle.

The people in the synagogue were outraged. They were angry at the boy's disrespect for the prayer service. But the rabbi responded, "A terrible decree was hanging over us. The shepherd boy's whistle pierced the heavens and erased the decree. His whistle saved us because it was sincere and came from his heart."

It's so easy to go to a prayer service and yet not pray a single word to God. On the other hand, the shepherd boy could not pronounce a single word in the prayer book, and yet his prayers went straight to heaven because they were heartfelt.

This concept has its roots in the Bible when Jacob bequeathed a double portion of land to Joseph. Jacob referred to the land as: "*the ridge I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow.*" We know from the Bible that it was Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, who captured the city after the inhabitants had disgraced their sister Dinah (Genesis 34:25). How could Jacob claim credit for conquering Shechem and then give it away to another of his sons? (Read Genesis 48:21-22.)

The Jewish sages explain that Jacob's terms "*sword and bow*" refer to his "prayers and supplications" before God. Jacob acknowledged that his heartfelt prayers were the real impetus behind the acquisition of the land he now passed forward. While Simeon and Levi may have been successful at physically capturing the city, it was Jacob's prayers that led to their success.

But that's not all that Jacob's story reveals about the power of prayer. The terms "*sword and bow*" also teach us about some of the most effective ways to pray. Just as a sword is most effective when it is sharp, so, too, our prayers become most piercing when they are sharp, focused, and defined. Just as an arrow travels the furthest when it is most drawn back on the bow, so, too, do our prayers travel "closer to God" when they emanate from the deepest depths of our hearts.

This is the work of the heart. Like Jacob and other faithful pray-ers from the Bible, prayer straight from the depths of our hearts is prayer that will reach God's ears.



*But if from there
you seek the LORD your God,
you will find him if you
seek him with all your heart
and with all your soul.*

DEUTERONOMY 4:29

Prayer, Then and Now

As we have learned, prayer, at its essence, is pure expression of our heart. It is communication with our Creator in all its beauty and mystery. King David demonstrated this again and again when he poured out his heart through the words of his songs, the psalms. David's joy, his agony and despair, his faith and hope, have stirred the hearts of millions over the centuries.

However, if you walk into a synagogue today, you will find that prayer has become very much formalized. There are set times when the congregation comes together to pray; a prayer book dictates the words of prayer. Over the centuries, the liturgy of prayer has been developed and adopted.

According to Jewish tradition, the patriarchs each established prayer at specific times of day. Abraham is credited with establishing prayer in the morning, Isaac with prayer in the afternoon, and Jacob with evening prayer.

Later on we find that the tradition of praying three set times a day was upheld by pious Israelites such as David who said: *"Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice."* However, the words of prayer and the place of prayer remained individual.

An important element that significantly influenced the evolution of Jewish prayer was the practice of ritual sacrifice as prescribed in the Bible and observed by the Israelites. During this time period, which lasted from the giving of the Bible at Mount Sinai through the destruction of the Second Temple, ritual sacrifice was the most intense form of communication between man and God. Everything changed when the Temples were destroyed and all that remained were the people's prayers.

As the Israelites were exiled and prayer began to slip away, the Jewish sages, beginning with Ezra of the Bible, began to formalize prayer. Ezra established the obligation to pray three times a day facing Jerusalem. In addition, Ezra and his court composed the central prayer of every Jewish prayer service called the *Amidah* (pronounced ah-mee-dah). (We will learn more about this important prayer in the next quarter study.)

Over time, more prayers were composed and added to the Jewish prayer book, although reluctantly. While these prayers gave words for our feelings, the rabbis were hesitant to compromise the spontaneous and heartfelt nature of prayer. Again, it is not so much what is being said or how, but rather the intent behind the communication that is most important.

Today, Jewish services include such formal elements as having an established place to pray, an ideal quorum of ten men, a lengthy text of prayers, and set times of prayer. However, all this was never meant to produce empty words and meaningless rituals. Rather the goal was, and remains, to create an ideal circumstance where people would reach out to God regularly with heart-based communication, and to give our prayers individual meaning and significance.

Moreover, the idea of praying to God anywhere, any time, and with any words is encouraged. In fact, when our hearts are truly connected to God, we can be in a state of prayer all day long. When a person of faith lives a life inclined toward God, prayer becomes almost an attitude or condition of the heart—an ongoing communion and communication with our Maker of the Universe.



*Evening, morning and noon
I cry out in distress,
and he hears my voice.*

PSALM 55:17

Think About It...

1. **According to Jewish tradition, the three patriarchs established three times for prayer—morning, afternoon, and evening.** What is unique about praying at these different points of the day? Why do you think each of these times require prayers specific to the time of day? How might our prayers and needs differ at each juncture?
2. **Think about a time when an unanswered prayer turned out to be a great blessing for you.** How has that experience impacted your prayers? How can you consider that no prayer is ever “wasted.” Each prayer is answered in the right way at the right time. How might that inspire the way that you pray today?
3. **Read the following passages: Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6–7; and 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18.** What do these passages teach you about prayer from a Christian perspective? How are they similar to the Jewish teachings on prayer? How do they differ?
4. **Where are you most inspired in prayer?** For some people, it's in a house of worship; for others, it might be outside in nature; some people are most comfortable in their homes. Find a place where you feel prayer flows most naturally from your heart and visit as often as you can.
5. **While personal prayer is wonderful, sometimes our liturgy gives voice to our deepest thoughts and feelings.** Which prayer composed by another person resonates with you most? How can you use those words to express your own heart?



Apply It

1. **Pray again and again.** Don't ever give up if your prayer isn't answered the first time or the 100th time. We never know which prayer will be the one that unlocks heaven's doors.
2. **Change yourself first.** Before praying, take some time to consider not only what you would like God to change in your life, but also what you might need to change within yourself and in your life.
3. **Prepare for prayer.** While spontaneous prayer is encouraged, it's also helpful at times to approach prayer with preparation. When we are clear on what we are asking for and how to get in touch with our deepest feelings on the matter, our prayers are stronger.
4. **Pray outside in nature.** This practice, which has deep roots in Jewish tradition, makes use of the beauty and majesty of God's world to inspire our prayers and deepen our connection to God.
5. **Establish a daily time (or times) for prayer.** It's so easy to get swept up in the busyness of life and neglect time for prayer. Make an appointment with God each day—then keep it!
6. **Pray all day long.** Prayer, at its core, was always intended to be spontaneous—from our heart straight to God. We always need God's help. When we recognize and remember this, we can imbue our day with prayer.

