

## Do I Really Need to Pray?

Let me begin with a word of gratitude. I want to express my appreciation to all of you for the kind words and notes you have sent me over the last two weeks. During my illness, your generosity of spirit has sustained me and my family. Over the last eleven years, I have seen your kindness to others; it is something very different to experience oneself.

We should all be proud to be part of the Emunah family which helps us in moments of joy, as well as in moments of difficulty.



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During my recent hospitalization, there were a number of things that nurtured me: solid medical care (we seem to have that in spades in the Boston area!), my family, your words and prayer. There were several moments when all I could do was close eyes and recite *tefillot* (prayers) that have sustained me in the past and thankfully, were there for me again.

There is something about prayer during moments of difficulty. Many of you who we honored this Veterans' Shabbat know the famous phrase that "there are no atheists in fox holes." When we are under duress, we turn to what we know – to ancient words

that have assisted us in the past and to the Ancient One who is always there to sustain us.

When we really need to pray, words often come and we pray from the heart – we *daven* (pray) spontaneously. But sometimes, it does not come.

For those who have never honed their *davening* ability, it can be more challenging. For those, this articulation of deeply held feelings is not easy and not always possible.

They are missing this key tool, this vital skill – sometimes, at a moment when they could really use it.

Often, when I talk with people about prayer these days, the response is mixed. For some, it is central and for others, it is a mystery.

Here are some responses:

“Yeah, I would love to learn how to pray, but I don’t really have the time.”

“I am kind of interested in prayer, but actually, it does not seem that relevant.”

“Rabbi, does prayer really do anything?”



praying.”



“Well, I know I need sleep, I need to exercise and eat right, but prayer – that’s just not nearly as important!”

These responses reflect the sentiments of young people as well as adults. Students tell me that they are just “not into

“Do I really need to pray?” is a refrain I have heard on retreats, *shul*-ins and *Shabbatonim*.

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So, here’s the thing. I am a pretty rational guy; I love science and try to root my life in facts. And we do need all these other things – sleep, exercise, and healthy eating – and, strange as it may sound, we also need prayer.

It turns out we need prayer and prayer needs us. What do I mean by that?

We actually need to cultivate our prayer lives and it takes work – if we have not worked on it, it will not be there for us when we really need it.

It’s interesting – the one group that is generally more excited about *tefillot* is our youngest children. Young children have an innate spirituality – they love to pray and they pray spontaneously. Ask a young child to pray and she will open up her heart and share the murmurings of her soul.

But as we grow, we become more self-conscious; we lose the ability to simply plug-in to our souls, allowing feelings and words to flow freely. We constrain ourselves and we lose this ability.

Sometimes, as we get older – we can cultivate it again. Growing up, I remember how difficult prayer was for me. I was the son of a rabbi, attending an Orthodox yeshiva where daily *tefillah* was woven into the fabric of the day – but I felt so disconnected from it.

I went to one of my teachers: Rabbi Jack Beiler, a kindly rabbi who taught me in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and sat with me as I shared my doubts about prayer.

He listened thoughtfully and then responded: “David, there are some people who simply cannot pray; perhaps you are one of those people.”



I’ll never forget hearing those words. I felt better; I had a diagnosis. I was prayer-challenged. It turns out that there are millions of people who suffer from this syndrome.

And for a number of years, *davening* was not a real or deep part of my life. I engaged in it at times because I was a Jew and wanted to be with my people, but not because I wanted to really pray – to really feel something.



Only years later, in my 20's, did I return to *tefillah* and began to realize that it is such a powerful discipline, one that I have been delving into for decades and one in which I still have much, much more to learn.

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Prayer is about verbalizing what you feel.

Does it help?

It does!

For some of the same reasons that writing in a journal helps us process our emotions, prayer helps us process what we are experiencing.

Think about it – when we dream, we process and rearrange experiences and feelings from the day.

This helps us better understand our lives and what we are feeling.

That is the same as prayer. When I really *daven*, when I *daven* deeply, the fixed liturgy and the words of my heart launch me into a place of more profound understanding. I know myself better and I become a more whole person.

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There are not many ancient recorded prayers in the Torah, but there is one in this week's *parashah*. After Sarah's death, Avraham realizes that his son Yitzhak needs a wife and he sends his servant to find a suitable partner for his son.

This is not an easy task and one can sense the tension in the assignment. First, Avraham asks his servant to take an oath for this task. Second, his servant



senses that this will be a challenging assignment – perhaps the woman he finds will not want to come to the land of Canaan; so, he asks Avraham: “Can I bring Isaac back to the land from which you came?” Avraham yells at him: ‘No way can he go back there!’ Third, his servant is under a lot of pressure – he is in charge of a large entourage including ten of his master’s camels.

Knowing all this, what is his servant feeling?

He is stressed.

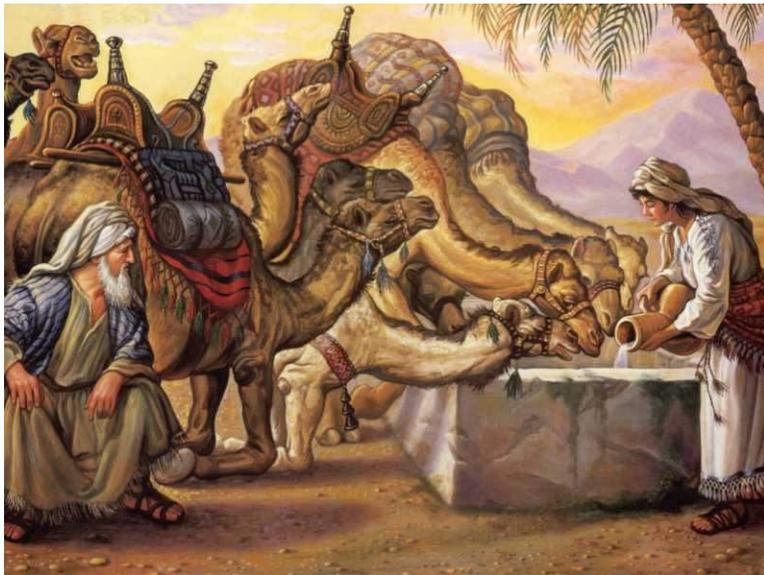
Under pressure.

Perhaps he is anxious and nervous as well.

Scared?

Will he be successful?

He sets off on his journey and comes to a resting place. Finally, he has a moment to breathe. He has to gas-up; I mean, water the camels. And, at this rest stop, he pauses.



That is the first and most essential part of prayer.

Stopping.

You cannot really pray on the run. You need to stop and take your spiritual/emotional pulse.

By the way, this is a major moment in the Torah – this is the first time someone prays for spiritual guidance at a

critical moment!

And who is it? Not Adam, not Noah, not Avraham himself – our earliest spiritual ancestor!

No, it is this unnamed servant (whom tradition calls Eliezer) who prays for personal guidance when he needs it.

It is such an interesting prayer, as he not only prays for good fortune, but delineates exactly what he needs.

He also prays for someone else – another key component of prayer: getting beyond ourselves.

But I find the emotional piece the most powerful: “Adonai, God of my master Avraham, grant me good fortune today, and deal graciously with my master Avraham.”

Here, in the Torah’s first prayer – we find the core of *davening*: being in touch with what you are feeling. The unnamed servant is scared – his prayer reflects that and he asks for help.

That’s the central core of prayer: being honest with yourself.

I am nervous, I am worried and I could use some help.

That’s it – it sounds easy, but that’s not true.

How many times have I come home for dinner and not been in touch with what I was feeling and allowed stress to overwhelm me. Instead, I needed to understand what I was feeling and even articulate it. When I share with my wife what I am feeling, then she is there for me. But it starts with being more connected to what we are experiencing.

*Tefillah* is all about knowing what we need and articulating it – verbalizing it for ourselves, our families, for God.

When I was in the hospital, it was easy to know what I was feeling. I was in pain; I was scared. I turned to an old friend – the *Asher Yatzar brakhah* (prayer for the body) which is an expression of how vulnerable,



BRIGHAM  
AND  
WOMEN'S  
HOSPITAL

and yet how magnificent our bodies are. These miraculous instruments filled with intricate parts that wondrously come together can also fall apart. And when they do, we need help – sometimes, that is very concrete assistance from doctors and nurses and I was blessed to receive that; sometimes, it is the emotional support from families and friends and I was blessed to receive that as well; sometimes, it is spiritual sustenance from the Healer of all and there were moments when I felt I was receiving that as well....

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We need prayer – because it anchors us when the waves of life start to crest around us.

We need prayer – because it helps us pause when we need to.

We need prayer – because it teaches us to be in touch with what we are feeling.

We need prayer – because it helps us verbalize the rhythms of our souls.

And prayer needs us!

What do I mean by that?

There is a great mystery that lies at the center of the universe. The more we know – and I am reading the great scientific book: *A Short History of Nearly Everything* by Bill Bryson, so I know we know a good deal about the world – the more we realize that we know very little. The enormity and tininess of the universe are simply beyond comprehension.

We also do not really know the core – the great Unknowable that lies at the center of the universe: the Holy One, Adonai, God, the Initiator and Sustainer of All.

But, we have glimmers. Those glimmers from our tradition and our experience teach us that God wants to be in relationship with us, just as God wants us to be in a relationship with others.

God wants our hearts and souls to be open to God.

God wants us.

God speaks to us through the words of our tradition and we speak to God through *tefillah*.

Whether we are fighting a war, lying in a hospital bed, celebrating a *Bar Mitzvah* or merely appreciating the wonder of a glorious Shabbat, we are asked to elevate those moments, by feeling God's presence and articulating the feelings of our souls.

That is prayer and that is what we all need.

