

Why Pray?

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Let me start by acknowledging that throughout history, most people prayed because they were in trouble (to alleviate sickness, sorrow, danger) or because they needed something. As the saying goes: There are no atheists in foxholes. Needing something, people naturally turned to a higher power, hoping, fantasizing, praying that God would answer their prayers and magically—against logic or empirical facts of the situation—save them or grant them a request.

I, or a loved one, have cancer. There is no medicine that is working. The doctors have given up. Then people turned to God and asked for a miracle—to denature the pathology, to rouse the body to counterattack, and so on.

The problem with that approach to prayer is that more and more scientific evidence has confirmed that natural processes operate by predictable laws, actions, and consequences. In religious terms, this means that God does not tinker or trifle with the laws of nature. There has been more disciplined recording and

analysis of treatment and outcomes. The number of magical cures or outcomes have shrunk. Even the ‘miracles’ seem connected, or more highly correlated, to internal physical factors rather than to external interventions, such as a divine response to a person’s prayers. Under the circumstances, secular attitudes have grown steadily among the more educated and the more highly trained scientifically. The question arises more sharply: Why pray?

Let me add a further word of introduction—reflecting some of my personal thinking. I believe that Judaism’s main contribution to the world (directly and through Christianity and Islam and its influence on Western civilization) has been not just the understanding of God as Creator and universal grounding of existence. Rather, it is the message of *tikkun olam*, that God intends, wants, and needs the world to become perfect. Judaism calls on human beings to live their lives and work on this *tikkun*. No less important is the Jewish teaching of a method to perfect the world. God

has entered into a covenant, a partnership, with humans, to repair the world together. Voluntarily, non-coersively, out of love, the two partners are pledged to work to overcome poverty, hunger, oppression, all forms of discrimination and injustice, war, and sickness—in order to heal people and make the world whole. This means that God will not bestow perfection magically or coerce people to do the right thing. God will help those who help themselves.

I also believe that there is a history to the covenant. As a true loving partner, God seeks human empowerment and dignity. As humans become more competent, God self-limits to invite and encourage humans to do more and take more responsibility for the outcome. (The age of prophecy ends; instead people, Rabbis according to the Talmud, discover God’s instructions and directions.) From the beginning, human medical efforts are affirmed as covenantal actions—rather than seen as encroachments on Divine prerogatives (for example, Exodus 21:18 “and he shall surely

heal”). As medicine becomes more competent, the Divine interventions come through human agency. The doctors’ miracles are the Divine interventions.

What then is the role of prayer in an era of greater and growing human competence? And in an age when we seek to shake off magical thinking in order to relate to God more out of love, out of partnership, rather than out of servile need to win God’s favor and out of self-interested desire for favors?

I would propose three functions for prayer. All humans live inside their own skins. One’s perspective is skewed by being focused on one’s self. By turning to God in prayer, one is motivated to move beyond a self-centered or narcissistic perspective for a moment to see the world from a Divine perspective—the whole world perspective. In praying, I see myself as a finite creature within the great whole. The world *is not* centered on me. This makes me (the individual) no less important. After all, every human being is an image of God—godlike, endowed with the intrinsic dignities of infinite value, equality, and uniqueness. But the universe does not rotate around me. When the individual prays and sees the world from Divine perspective, they see the incredible beauty and grandeur of existence. We recognize how much goodness has been granted in our lives; how much health, life experience, intelligence,

growth has brought one’s life (and the lives of our loved ones) this far. This is expressed in *prayers of praise and thanksgiving* (not request), which have always been part of traditional prayers. This category would include blessings for food, for health—“who straightens up the bowed down,” “who gives the tired new strength,” “who heals the sick”—and for the normal operations of our bowels and all the other openings and closings of tubes in our bodies (heart, brain, mouth).

The second category of prayer is particularly significant in our time when humans are more competent. Sometimes, I call this category the ‘prayers of the powerful’ instead of the past ‘prayers of the powerless.’ It is about knowing one’s limits and respecting the capacity and dignity of the other. Instead of the incurable patient pleading for a miracle, there is the prayer of the doctor: God, guide my hand; God help me focus my judgement and wisdom to make the right diagnosis and prescriptions. Teach me to respect the patient and enlist their choices, to engage them in the therapeutic process. Help me see that I am not God. Remind me to respect the patient’s God-given body, to work with its natural rhythms in devising a cure. Teach me to accept my finitude and express it in not overtreating, in not turning the patient into a guinea pig for experimentation. Inspire me with love so that I will get up in the middle of the night and make a

home visit to better understand and treat the sick person. There is an equivalent prayer for every business person, therapist, teacher, trainer, supervisor, and so on.

Finally there is a third form of prayer: to join with a congregation, to become part of the Jewish people or the larger community, to identify with the concerns and needs of the whole nation. In such a case, I may even say the old prayers—the unchanged words even of prayers whose magical thinking or retributivist overtone I may not accept any more. In saying these prayers, I identify with my people and its tradition. I acknowledge that the covenant to perfect the world (or to sustain individual lives) has been going on for thousands of years. I embrace past generations and express my gratitude to them even when I disagree with their words or some specific values. Still I acknowledge with gratitude their contribution, that they brought us and the covenant this far and that I am the beneficiary. At such a moment, I open up to the needs of *klal Yisrael* and of the whole world and am inspired to join in the effort of *tikkun olam*.

At such moments, sometimes, I open to God—not as the divine vending machine but as partner, sustainer, lover, redeemer of my people and myself. Thus these prayers become prayers of solidarity, thanksgiving, and of eternal love. ♦