
THE JEWISH VIEW OF PRAYER

Prayer provides every person with the profound ability to communicate with God. It is our opportunity to talk to God, to express our joys and frustrations and put forward our wishes. Moreover, prayer is a powerful means for personal introspection as well as contemplation of the world. Nevertheless, praying to God raises basic questions regarding our relationship with Him.

This class will explore the profound nature of prayer and the effect it can have on our lives. We will explore the Jewish definition of prayer and seek to understand why every prayer is valuable, whether “answered” or not. We will also investigate Jewish prayer specifically, why it is standardized and why we pray in Hebrew. (Some of the topics dealt with here are further developed in the Morasha Class entitled, Overview of the Amidah, Part I).

This class will answer the following questions:

- ✧ Why is prayer such a central feature of Jewish observance?
- ✧ What is the Jewish understanding of prayer?
- ✧ Do our prayers really make a difference? Does God really answer our prayers?
- ✧ Why was Jewish prayer formalized into the siddur?
- ✧ Why are Jewish prayers all in Hebrew? Does God really care what language we pray in?

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INTRODUCTION – CALLING THE BOSS

Seattle resident Sarah Busch was chagrined when she opened her monthly Nordstrom statement. Instead of the concise, compact statement she had been receiving for decades, the 79-year-old retired bookkeeper unfolded a bulky 8 x 10 inch statement in a new format. She decided to complain.

She phoned Nordstrom's corporate headquarters right there in Seattle and asked to speak to someone in management. "Don't give me Customer Service," she instructed the operator. After a few rings, a masculine voice answered the phone. "First of all, I'd like to know to whom I'm speaking," Sarah Busch began. "This is Blake Nordstrom," came the reply. "Blake Nordstrom? You're the President!" a confounded Sarah Busch exclaimed. "I am indeed," he responded. "What are YOU doing answering the phone?" "Well," Mr. Nordstrom explained in a bemused tone, "I was sitting here at my desk, and the phone rang, so I picked it up."

"You crack me up!" Mrs. Busch declared. She proceeded to tell Mr. Nordstrom that she had been a loyal customer since Nordstrom was nothing but a shoe store in downtown Seattle. "I still have the first credit card you issued when you merged with Best Apparel in 1963. It's all worn out and expired, but I keep it as a memento." The corporate president and the retired bookkeeper enjoyed a convivial conversation for about ten minutes, with Sarah Busch not forgetting to lodge her complaint about the new format of the monthly statement.

Two days later, she received a letter from Blake Nordstrom. Enclosed was a shiny new replica of her antiquated

Nordstrom/Best credit card, obviously fabricated just for her. Mr. Nordstrom thought she would get a kick out of it, and indeed she did.

This is a true story (related to me by Sarah Busch herself), and it is also a staggering metaphor. When we pray, how many of us actually expect that the Big Boss Himself will pick up the line? How many of us expect that God actually wants a personal relationship with us?

When we receive a gift (such as every day of life), how often do we appreciate that the Almighty fabricated it just for us, because He wants us to enjoy it? How heedless are we of the invitation to "come up," in order to forge a relationship with the Divine? When things go wrong, do we actually feel that we have God's ear? How little do we perceive that the Master of the Universe "comes down" to us? And while we may be insignificant in our own eyes, can we believe that to our Creator we are on par with "the famous Sarah Busch" -- i.e., worthy of Divine attention and affection?

(Excerpted from Blake Nordstrom Speaking, by Sara Yoheved Rigler www.aish.com)

Most of us would be as surprised as Sarah Busch was if we picked up the phone and managed to get the boss of a major corporation on the line. But the truth is that any of us can speak to the Boss of bosses without the assistance of even a telephone. And unlike most corporate CEO's, God wants to hear from us, and on a daily basis to boot!

SECTION I. THE VIRTUE OF PRAYER

In this section we shall explore the exalted status of prayer in the Jewish worldview. The point here is simply to establish clearly just how significant prayer is. As we progress through the class we will begin to understand why.

PART A. THE CRAFT OF OUR FATHERS

Informal, individual prayer was established by the Avot (the Patriarchs) prior to the Temple period.

1. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 26b – The Patriarchs introduced three prayers.

Rabbi Yossi bar Rabbi Chaninah said: The prayers were instituted by the forefathers ... Avraham (Abraham) established the morning prayer as it is stated ... "And Avraham went in the morning to the place where he had stood (*ammad*) [before] God." (Bereishit/Genesis 19:26). "Amidah" is a term specifically used for prayer as it is stated, "And Pinchas stood (*veyamod*) and prayed." (Tehillim/Psalms 106:30)

Yitzchak (Isaac) established the afternoon prayer as it says, "And Yitzchak went to meditate (*lasuach*) in the field just before evening" (Bereishit 24:63). "Sichah" is an expression specifically used for prayer.

רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא אמר: תפלות אבות תקנום ...
אברהם תקן תפילת שחרית שנא' וישכם אברהם
בבקר אל המקום אשר עמד שם ואין עמידה אלא
תפילה שנאמר ויעמד פינחס.

יצחק תקן תפלת מנחה שנאמר ויצא יצחק לשווח
בשדה לפני ערב ואין שיחה אלא תפלה.

Yaakov (Jacob) established the evening prayer as it says, “[And Yaakov] *vayifgah* (reached) the place, and he slept there because the sun had set...” (Bereishit 28:10-11). “Pegiyah” is a term specifically used for prayer.

יעקב תקן תפלת ערבית שנאמר ויפגע במקום וילן שם ואין פגיעה אלא תפלה.

Later in Jewish history, the practice of the forefathers stood the Jewish people in good stead. Being chased by the Egyptians after the mass exodus from Egypt, trapped between the advancing army on one side and the vast sea on the other, the Jewish people prayed to God.

2. **Shemot (Exodus) 14:10 with commentary of Rashi – Before the sea split, the Jewish people prayed.**

As Pharaoh came close, the Israelites looked up. They saw the Egyptians marching at their rear, and the people became very frightened.

Rashi: They grasped the craft of their forefathers. Regarding Avraham it is written: “To the place where he stood,” regarding Yitzchok: “to meditate (pray) in the field,” and regarding Yaakov: “He reached (prayed) in the place.”

ופרעה הקריב וישאו בני ישראל את עיניהם והנה מצרים נסע אחריהם ויראו מאד ויצעקו בני ישראל אל יקוק:

רש"י ד"ה ויצעקו - תפשו אומנות אבותם. באברהם הוא אומר (בראשית י"ט כז) אל המקום אשר עמד שם, ביצחק (שם כד סג) לשוח בשדה, ביצחק (שם כח יא) ויפגע במקום:

PART B. THE MITZVAH TO PRAY

Aside from being the “craft of our forefathers,” prayer is also a mitzvah. For the Jewish people, it is a mitzvah to pray every day.

1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 11:13 – We are enjoined to serve God with our heart.**

If you are careful to pay heed to my commandments, which I am prescribing to you today, and if you love God your Lord with all your heart and soul, [then God has made this promise]:

והיה אם שמע תשמעו אל מצותי אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום לאהבה את יקוק אלהיכם ולעבדו בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם:

2. **Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Tefillah (Laws of Prayer) 1:1 – The connection of prayer to Avodah is derived in the Talmud as the service (Avodah) of the heart.**

It is a positive commandment to pray each day as it is stated, “And you shall serve the Lord your God (Shemot 23:25) ... They taught that “serve,” means prayer, as it is stated, “And you shall serve Him with all your heart” (Devarim 11:13). The Sages asked, “What is the service of the heart? This is prayer” (Ta’anit 2a).

מצות עשה להתפלל בכל יום שנאמר [שמות כג:כה] ועבדתם את ה' אלהיכם מפי השמועה למדו שעבודה זו היא תפלה שנאמר [דברים יא:יג] ולעבדו בכל לבבכם אמרו חכמים אי זו היא עבודה שבלב זו תפלה [תענית ב.].

The essence of the mitzvah to pray, called “service of the heart,” is daily and has three elements to it.

3. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 1:2 – Prayer is comprised of praise, request, and thanks to God.**

This commandment obligates each person to offer supplication and prayer every day and utter praises of the Holy One, blessed be He; then petition for all his needs with requests and supplications; and finally, give praise and thanks to God for the goodness that He has bestowed upon him; each one according to his own ability.

חייב מצוה זו כך הוא שיהא אדם מתחנן ומתפלל בכל יום ומגיד שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ואחר כך שואל צרכיו שהוא צריך להם בבקשה ובתחנון ואחר כך נותן שבח והודיה לה' על הטובה שהשפיע לו כל אחד לפי כחו.

There is an additional mitzvah to pray: at a time of need, and this is considered fundamental to the universal obligation to believe in Him.

4. **Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim Vol. II, Chapter 24 – Prayer demonstrates a basic belief in God.**

The essence of belief in God is that only He can ultimately guarantee our livelihood or cure our diseases. And when a person does not trust in God and does not pray to Him, it is as if he is denying belief in God for the sake of belief in something else...

זהו עיקר האמונה בהש"ת שרק הוא הנותן פרנסה והרפא חולים וכשאנו בוטח על הש"ת ואינו מתפלל אליו הרי הוא כאינו מאמין בו ומאמין בדברים אחרים...

It is for this reason, suggests Rabbi Feinstein, that the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, was called by the prophet, “a house of prayer for all the nations.”

5. **Yeshayah (Isaiah) 56:7 – The Temple was, and will be again, a house of prayer for everyone.**

I will bring them to My holy mount, and I will cause them to rejoice in My house of prayer, their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon My altar, for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (And not just the Jews – Rashi)

והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמחתים בבית תפילתי עולתיהם וזבחייהם לרצון על מזבחי כי ביתי בית תפלה יקרא לכל העמים (ולא לישראל לבדם – רש"י).

PART C. PILLAR OF THE WORLD

1. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 1:2 – “Divine Service” is one of the three principal goals of Creation.**

Shimon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say, “The world rests on three things: On Torah, on Avodah (Divine service) and on acts of kindness.”

שמעון הצדיק היה משירי כנסת הגדולה, הוא היה אומר, על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים.

The importance of prayer is derived from its direct relationship to *Avodah*, (Divine service in the Temple). After the destruction of the Temple, prayer replaced *Avodah* as a primary means of building a relationship with God on both a personal and national level.

This idea is hinted to in the following verse:

2. **Hoshea 14:3 – No longer with a Temple, our prayers replace the sacrifices.**

So we will render for bulls [i.e., sacrifices] the offering of our lips [i.e., prayer].

ונשלמה פרים שפתינו.

How does prayer replace Avodah?

3. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Handbook of Jewish Thought, Volume II – There is an important connection between prayer and the Temple sacrifices.**

Prayer is considered the service of God similar to the sacrifices of the Holy Temple. The Psalmist thus said, “Let my prayer be set forth as incense before You, the lifting of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Psalms 141:2). Just as a sacrifice unites the spiritual and material by making a lowly animal the object of serving God, so does prayer unite the spiritual and material by making the request of our material needs a service of God. It is for this reason that, when it is impossible to bring sacrifices, prayer can be offered in their stead, as the prophet exclaimed, “We will offer the words of our lips instead of calves” (Hosea 14:3).

Thus, formal prayers were ordained in place of the regular daily sacrifices performed in the Temple in Jerusalem – which themselves were accompanied by prayer and song. Moreover, the prayer of a sincere heart is better than any sacrifice, as the Psalmist exclaimed, “I will praise the name of God with a song, I will exalt Him with thanksgiving, and it shall please God more than the offering of an ox” (Psalms 69:31-32).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I.

- ∞ Prayer is a heritage of the Jewish people going back to our founding forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. For that reason, the instinct to pray is deep rooted in the Jewish psyche.
- ∞ It is a mitzvah to pray to God for our needs every day. Doing so puts into action our basic belief in Him. As such, it is incumbent upon all humanity.
- ∞ Prayer is one of the spiritual pillars upon which the world stands. It functions in place of the sacrifices once brought in the Holy Temple. As such, it is the Divine service that we perform with our heart.

SECTION II. WHAT IS PRAYER?

What is the act of prayer so lauded in the previous section? Here we will try to define what a genuine act of prayer looks like.

PART A. SELF-JUDGMENT AND CONTEMPLATION

We can gain insight into the meaning of prayer by analyzing the meaning of the Hebrew word for it: *Lehitpallel*. The root of the word is *pallal* and we find a fascinating usage of it in the Book of Bereishit (Genesis). Having been reunited with his son Yosef (Joseph) after many years of separation, Yaakov (Jacob) has this to say upon meeting Yosef's children:

1. Bereishit 48:11 – Did Yaakov really never pray to see Yosef alive again?

“I never even hoped (pallal-ti) to see your face,” said Israel (Yaakov) to Yosef, “But now God has even let me see your children.”

ויאמר ישראל אל יוסף ראה פניך לא פללתי והנה
הראה אתי אלהים גם את זרעך:

From here we see that it would be too simplistic to translate the word *pallal* as prayer, but it does give us a hint as to its true meaning.

2. Rashi, Ibid. – The root of prayer is thought.

“I never even hoped,” — [Meaning:] I did not dare have any thought that I would ever see your face again. The word *pallal-ti* means “thought” as in: “Give advice, carry on the thought” (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 16:3).

לא פללתי: לא מלאני לבי לחשוב מחשבה שאראה
פניך עוד. פללתי לשון מחשבה, כמו (ישעיה טז ג)
הביאי עצה עשי פלילה:

Maharal in Gur Aryeh explains that since the word *pallal-ti* means “I thought,” as Rashi translates it, the simple meaning of the verse would be that Yaakov was telling Yosef that he never thought about seeing him again. Since that certainly could not have been the case, for Yaakov loved Yosef very much and had never been consoled over his loss, Rashi veers from the literal meaning and tells us that what Yaakov meant was that he did not let himself think about Yosef.

When we extend the grammar lesson one step further, we come to a better understanding of prayer. If *pallal* means to think, the *lehitpallel*, the reflexive form of the word means to think about oneself, or to oneself.

3. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, Translated by Dayan Dr. I Grunfeld, The Soncino Press, Jerusalem, 1891, p.472 – Evaluating our character, actions, and goals through prayer.

Hitpallel, from which “*Tefillah*” is derived, originally meant to deliver an opinion about oneself, to judge oneself or an inner attempt at so doing such as the *hitpa'el* (reflexive) form of the Hebrew verb frequently denotes ... Thus it denotes to step out of active life in order to attempt to gain a true judgment about oneself ... about one's relationship to God and the world, and the world to oneself ... In English we call *Tefillah* “prayer,” but this word only incompletely expresses the concept “to pray,” i.e., to ask for something is only a minor section of *Tefillah*.

A teenage girl knocked on our door one Sunday morning, offering a free copy of a local newspaper. I declined, since I did not like that particular newspaper. She then asked if I would like to buy a subscription. (Obviously she was not a student of logic – if I did not want a free copy, I was certainly not going to pay for a subscription!) Not deterred by my refusal, she then begged me to reconsider. I asked her why she was so desperate to sell me the paper, and she replied, “If I sell two more subscriptions I will win a Discman, and I really need one!” Now, had she said she was saving up for college, or helping to support her family because her father was unemployed, I would have been more sympathetic – but fulfilling her “need” for a portable CD player was not something that I felt required my contribution.

When we pray, we should ask ourselves, “Is this a frivolous request? Will I use God's gift for a positive purpose? How have I used the gifts He has given me until now?” Prayer, therefore, involves an appraisal of one's life, a reality-check. [from Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, pp. 429-430]

PART B. A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

1. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim (Path of the Just), Chapter 19 – Prayer is a form of work because it involves a negotiation with God.**

The first [of three things that a person must consider in order to acquire a fear of G-d] is that he [must know that he] is actually standing in the presence of the Creator, Blessed be His Name, and is *nosei v'notein* [literally, negotiating or exchanging] with Him even though He cannot be seen. This is the hardest [of the three], namely, for a person to create a true picture [of this concept] in his heart while he is not at all aided by his senses. However, one who is of sound intellect will, with a little thought and attention, be able to implant in his heart the truth of how he is actually discoursing with the Blessed One: he implores before Him and entreats Him, and the Blessed One listens to him and is attentive to his words in the same way that a man, speaking to his friend, is heard and is listened to.

האחד שהוא עומד ממש לפני הבורא יתברך שמו ונושא ונותן עמו, אף על פי שאין עינו של אדם רואהו, ותראה כי זה הוא היותר קשה שיצטייר בלב האדם ציור אמיתי, יען אין החוש עוזר לזה כלל, אמנם מי שהוא בעל שכל נכון, במעט התבוננות ושימת לב, יוכל לקבוע בלבו אמיתת הדבר, איך הוא בא ונושא ונותן ממש עמו יתברך, ולפניו הוא מתחנן ומאתו הוא מבקש, והוא יתברך שמו מאזין לו מקשיב לדבריו, כאשר ידבר איש אל רעהו ורעהו מקשיב שומע אליו.

2. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Prayer: Creating Dialogue with Hashem, pp. 16-17 – Prayer is built on the understanding that God shares a common interest with mankind.**

What we see from the Mesilat Yesharim here is the description of prayer as a *masa u'matan*, an exchange or negotiation. Two parties enter into negotiations only when they share a common interest. A scientist who invents a new type of toothpaste is not going to enter into a *masa u'matan* with the owner of a shoe factory, because they do not share an interest in dental hygiene. The premise underlying any negotiation is that what is being discussed is of mutual concern. Out of this mutual concern flows an exchange, where each party presents his needs and, in turn, listens to the needs of the other.

Accordingly, when the Mesilat Yesharim describes prayer as a *masa u'matan* with Hashem, the clear implication is that He is not merely the Source of everything we receive, but He is also personally interested in the requests of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People). If we do not view prayer as such -- with the understanding that all our needs are a matter of His personal concern -- then prayer is no more than a person's expression of his dependency on the Creator, hardly a situation one would describe as a *masa u'matan*. Its only purpose, then, would be to uproot man's false sense of independence and self-sufficiency.

Prayer, however, is nothing like *hishtadlut* (effort) which may or may not prove fruitful. Prayer has a guaranteed outcome because God is interested in our needs, and wants to bestow His goodness upon us. God isn't just another "address" to approach in an effort to fulfill our needs. Prayer is engaging God in, so to speak, a face-to-face dialogue -- a personal and dynamic encounter. We present Hashem with our requests from our perspective. We discuss them with Him, we even argue with Him over them. In turn, God's presence is evident in our lives, and when we feel His presence, the outcome will definitely be the best possible bestowment of goodness upon us, because His ultimate desire is to bestow goodness upon His creatures.

The awareness of God in our lives and the internal dialogue that we can maintain with Him is essential to what it means to be human.

3. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Volume III, p. 68 – Essence of the soul is prayer; all of one's aspirations are expressed in prayer.**

What is meant by the term “*nefesh*?” This is prayer, as it is stated, “And I will pour out my soul (*nafshi*) before God” (Shmuel/Samuel I 1:15). Therefore the essence of the human soul is prayer. And the explanation of this subject is as follows: Every aspiration of a person is intrinsically prayer because it is characteristic of a person that any strong aspiration he has is expressed within his heart and also by his lips in prayer.

ומה היא הנפש, זו תפלה, שנאמר ואשפוך את נפשי לפני ה'. הרי שמהות הנפש היא תפלה. וביאור ענין זה: כל שאיפה הרי היא ממילא תפלה, כי כך היא תכונת האדם, ששאיפתו החזקה מתבטאת בפנים לבבו וגם בשפתיו - בתפלה.

PART C. PRAYER AS AN ACT OF FAITH

1. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer HaMitzvot of Rambam, Positive Mitzvah #5 – The mitzvah to pray includes a clause to believe that God answers prayers.**

And if perhaps prayer will be understood as a Biblical mitzvah, it should be included in the list of the Rav [the Rambam's list of the 613 Biblically mandated mitzvot] as a mitzvah for a time of distress, namely, that we should believe that He, the Blessed and Exalted One, listens to our prayers and He is the Savior from distress when we pray and cry out [to Him].

ואם אולי יהיה מדרשם בתפלה עיקר מה"ת נמנה אותו במנינו של הרב ונאמר שהיא מצוה לעת הצרות שנאמין שהוא יתברך ויתע' שומע תפלה והוא המציל מן הצרות בתפלה וזעקה.

2. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Prayer: Creating Dialogue with Hashem, pp. 43-44 – Prayer is itself an act of faith in God's involvement in our lives (independent of the consequences).**

For the Ramban, the mitzvah of prayer is not merely to pray but also to believe that God will answer us. Prayer, then, is a manifestation of faith -- an affirmation of our certainty that God answers us.

On a superficial level, it appears that prayer is not an activity which engenders faith, and that the two are unrelated: faith is developed by engaging with issues of faith, whereas prayer is nothing more than the requesting of our needs, which at times will be answered in a way that we feel suits us, and at times not. We erroneously think that faith means triumphing over our disappointment when our prayers appear not to have been answered. We think highly of the man of faith who is not shaken or disturbed if God appears not to have answered his prayers, for he accepts that the unfolding of events is governed by many unknowable calculations such as reward and punishment and the “bigger picture” of the world. According to this, a person will remain with his faith intact despite the fact that he prayed and was not answered, and not because he prayed.

However, this is not an accurate description of the relationship between faith and prayer. Indeed, in line with the Ramban's definition of the mitzvah, the role of prayer is in fact to develop and deepen our faith. Prayer develops in man a powerful and profound faith: that God is interested in us and indeed wants to bestow His good upon us. Prayer itself is what builds our faith in God; it is not simply an act whose outcome is a means of working on one's faith—either by augmenting it if the prayer was answered as he desired, or by maintaining it despite the prayer not being answered. The prayer itself is a manifestation of faith.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II.

- ⌘ Prayer requires honest self-reflection and introspection. That such is essential for prayer is expressed in the very word for prayer in Hebrew, *Tefillah*.
- ⌘ Prayer is built upon a realization that God is interested in the workings of our lives. As such, it is really a form of dialogue with God in which we express our deepest desires, aspirations, and even frustrations. Every wish of our heart can be prayer if it is directed into conversation to God.
- ⌘ The act of prayer is itself an act of faith. The very fact that we pray is a statement of our faith not only in God's ability to help us, should He decide to do so, but especially in God's genuine concern for our wellbeing.

SECTION III. THE PHILOSOPHY OF PRAYER

In this section we shall explore how prayer works, but first let us ask a fundamental question...

PART A. DOES PRAYER WORK?

The answer to that question will depend on what you believe the purpose of prayer to be.

Many - if not most - people believe that prayer will help you through a medical crisis such as heart bypass surgery. If a large group of people outside yourself, your family, and your friends add their prayers, that should be even more helpful, or so such reasoning goes.

Researchers have been trying to prove this and even to measure the effect of prayer. Since 1988, at least two studies have found that third-party prayers bestow benefits, but two other studies concluded that there are no benefits. These and other studies have been soundly criticized for flaws in both method and outcome. The fuzzy results goaded researchers to conduct the largest and most scientifically rigid investigation to date. It covered 1,802 people who underwent coronary bypass surgery at six different hospitals from Oklahoma City to Boston. The cost was \$2.4 million, paid by the John Templeton Foundation and the Baptist Memorial Health Care Corporation of Memphis.

In a clear setback for those who believe in the power of prayer, their prayers were not answered. Prayers offered by strangers did not reduce the medical complications of major heart surgery. Not only that, but patients who knew that others were praying for them fared worse than those who did not receive such spiritual support, or who had others praying for them but were not aware of it.

*"We thought that the certainty of knowing about the prayers of outsiders would reduce complications that accompany bypass surgery," notes Jeffrey Dusek, an instructor in medicine at Harvard Medical School. "But the results were paradoxical." (from William J. Cromie, "Prayers Don't Help Heart Surgery Patients," *The Harvard Gazette*, April 6, 2006)*

If the purpose of prayer is to get what you want, well then, you might not always see direct results. But if there is an intrinsic value to prayer, then every prayer (whether "answered" or not) is truly effective.

1. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner and Lisa Aiken, *The Art of Jewish Prayer*, pp. 3-4 – Viewing prayer as a wish list to God is childish.**

Imagine that you are a three-year-old child and you want a piece of cake. In fact, not only

do you want a piece of cake, you want the whole cake! Your considerations as a three-year-old are, “If I want cake, then I am entitled to it, and I must have it.” From the viewpoint of a child, the major function of parents is to gratify the child’s wishes. When they don’t, the child feels angry and deprived.

Now imagine yourself in the place of the parent of the child who wants the cake. You happen to know that if the child were to eat the cake, he would get sick, or would lose his appetite for nutritious food for the rest of the day. From the parent’s perspective, how would you feel denying the child’s request? How great is the difference between the child’s feeling and that of the parent in the same situation! ...

Our emotional view of God is often that of a child who wants, and whose perception of a totality of a picture is lacking. We often feel angry at God for hurting, frustrating, or ignoring us. We have to realize that these feeling are reactions to our perceptions of how God acts with us.

2. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, *Prayer: Creating Dialogue with Hashem*, pg. 42 – The purpose of prayer is the act of prayer itself, not the result.**

[W]e should be moved by God’s concern for His creation, and inspired by how our world -- connected to His will -- is suffused with holiness and greatness.

With this approach to prayer, prayer is indeed effective. Not so with the common perception of prayer as comprising a single criterion of seeing immediate results in this world. Since prayer is founded on recognizing that God is interested in us, it is clear that the fulfillment of our needs is subject to the endless deliberations and calculations that make up that Divine interest. And so, although God has an interest in what we ask for, this is not always expressed in a reality that is perceptible to us. But since we pray with the certainty that God is interested in our needs, our *prayer* is unquestionably effective.

Judaism teaches that the effort we put in to getting what we want takes place in the so-called “real” world. That is, we go to college to get a good job, we go to work to make money, we drive to the store to buy what we want, etc. But prayer is not just one of the possible routes we can take to achieving our goals, a short cut to success, as it were. It is much more than that. It is an act of objective worth with intrinsic value.

3. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, *Prayer: Creating Dialogue with Hashem* – Prayer is not just another means to get what we want.**

We have many ambitions and aspirations, both in the short and long term. We exert much effort to actualize these ambitions and aspirations and reach our goals. This often leads to a widespread error in how we approach prayer. We tend to think of prayer as merely another type of effort, grouping it together with all the various efforts we exert in order to achieve our life’s goals.

The truth, however, is that prayer and effort are not synonymous, and in fact are very different in nature. Prayer is not in the realm of effort, and bears no resemblance to it. All the efforts we exert in pursuing our aspirations and goals are shrouded in doubt. The nature of the world is such that our efforts may or may not make a difference; they may or may not achieve the intended result. In contrast, prayer is completely free of doubt; it is an act based on certainty.

PART B. DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE WORLD

Judaism is revolutionary in its understanding of what is the primary driving force behind events. Logic dictates that it is “nature” which brings rain, and one’s hard work which provides a successful harvest. In fact, God brings events to fruition as a response to our prayers. God arranged the world in this way because it is vital for mankind to retain a relationship with God through prayer.

1. **Bereishit (Genesis) 2:5 – Vegetation was created on the third day, but did not grow until the sixth day.**

No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground.

וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יְהִיָּה בָאָרֶץ וְכָל עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם
יִצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין
לְעֹבֵד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה:

2. **Rashi, Ibid. – Why didn't the grass grow on the third day?**

Why did it not rain? Because there was no man to work the land, and no one to recognize the goodness of rain.

When man came and recognized that rain was necessary for the world, he prayed for it, and it rained, and the trees and grasses sprouted.

...וְזֶה טַעַם לֹא הִמְטִיר לְפִי שְׂאֵדָם אֵין לְעֹבֵד אֶת
הָאֲדָמָה וְאֵין מְכִיר בְּטוֹבָתָן שֶׁל גְּשָׁמִים

וְכַשְּׁבָא אָדָם וַיֵּדַע שֶׁהֵם צוּרֵךְ לַעוֹלָם הַתְּפִלָּה עֲלֵיהֶם
וַיִּרְדּוּ וַצְמַחוּ הָאֵילָנוֹת וְהַדְּשָׁאִים:

3. **Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, Pirkei Machshavah, pp. 203-204 (Thoughts for a Jewish Home, pg. 258) – Prayer is the switch that makes blessing flow to our world.**

[Rashi is teaching us that] despite the world's necessity for rain, no rain fell while no one prayed for it. There is a specific system connecting Heaven and Earth. Heaven bestows plenty upon earth, but only on the condition that man, on Earth, connects Heaven to Earth through prayer.

This can be compared to electric current which is connected to every house. In order to benefit from it, we need to turn on the switch. So, too, the Divine flow of bounty is prepared and ready to be bestowed on us to benefit from, and prayer is the switch to bring it down.

לְמִדַּת שֶׁהַגְּשָׁמִים הֵם צוּרֵךְ הָעוֹלָם, וְזֶה הָיָה צָרִיכִים
לְרִדָּת, מְכִיל מְקוֹם כָּל עוֹד שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה מִי שִׁיתְּפִלֵּל עֲלֵיהֶם
הֵם לֹא יִרְדּוּ. זֶה הָיָה מַעֲרַכַת הַקֶּשֶׁר הַקִּיּוּמִית בֵּין שָׁמַיִם
וְאָרֶץ. הַשָּׁמַיִם מְשַׁפְּעִים שֶׁפַע לָאָרֶץ, אֲוֵלָם רַק בְּתִנָּאִי
שְׂאֵדָם הַנִּמְצָא בָאָרֶץ מְחַבְּרִים בְּבִקְשָׁתוֹ וְתִפִּילָתוֹ.

מִשָּׁל לְמַדָּה הַדְּבָר דּוּמָה? לְזֶרֶם חֲשֵׁמֶל הַמְּגִיעַ לְכָל בֵּית.
כְּדֵי לְהַנִּיחַ מִאֲוֵרוֹ, חִיבִים לְלַחוּץ עַל הַמַּתֵּג וּלְהַאִיר אֶת
הַחֹדֶר. כְּמוֹ כֵּן, הַשֶּׁפַע מוֹכֵן וּמוֹזְמֵן הוּא לָאָדָם. הַתְּפִלָּה
הִיא הַמַּתֵּג שֶׁבְּאִמְצָעוֹתָיו מְקַבֵּל אָדָם אֶת הַשֶּׁפַע.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe offers a similar metaphor for prayer, although this time it is not just a switch but the driving force behind what moves this world.

4. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II – Prayer is the spring that makes the wheels of the world go round.**

The world is comparable to a gigantic watch. Within the watch are many wheels moving one another until they move its hands. The watch has a spring which moves all of the wheels. In this world, the spring is prayer.

הָעוֹלָם דּוּמָה לְשַׁעוֹן אֲדִיר. בְּפָנִים הַשַּׁעוֹן יִשְׁנֵם הַרְבֵּה
גִּלְגָּלִים הַמְּנִיעִים זֶה אֶת זֶה עַד שֶׁמְּנִיעִים אֶת הַמַּחְזִיקִים.
וַיֵּשׁ לְשַׁעוֹן קִפְיָן הַמְּנִיעַ אֶת כָּל הַגִּלְגָּלִים. קִפְיָן זֶה
בְּעוֹלָם הִיא תְּפִלָּה.

5. Nefesh HaChaim 2:9 – Prayer is like God's food in that it intensifies His involvement with the world.

Prayer to God at the proper time is the essential "food" for the upper world and for one's own soul. As the Zohar (Parshat Bereishit 24:1) says: God's food is prayer; it takes the place of a sacrifice [in the Beit HaMikdash]. ... *Raya Mehemna* says in the name of Rabbi Shimon: It is forbidden to eat anything before the exalted King has eaten. What is His food? Prayer. The function of prayer is to intensify the involvement of God with mankind and the worlds, and to increase the flow of blessing and holiness to the worlds. This is what one should reflect on when praying.

ובפרט בעת עמדו להתפלל לפניו יתברך. אשר בשעתה המיוחדת לה. היא עיקר המזון להעולמו ולנפש האד' עצמו וכמ"ש בזוהר בראשית כ"ד א' מזונא דיל' צלותא דחשיבא לקרבנא ... ושם רמ"א ב' אר"ש על רזא דא אסור לב' לטעום כלום עד דייכול מלכא עלאה ומה איהו צלותא כו' עד דמלכא עלאה אכיל והיינו ג' ר' וג' אחרונות. כיון דאיהו אכיל כו', ע"ש באורך. והכל על הכוונה הנ"ל. שהיא המושכת תוספת קדושה וברכה ונהירו לכל עלמין. וצריך העובד האמיתי לכיון לזה:

Not only is prayer like God's food, it is also the real chicken soup for our souls.

6. Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, Sefer HaKuzari, Volume III, Chapter 5 – Prayer nourishes the soul.

A person's prayer provides nourishment for his soul just as food provides nourishment for his body. The influence of each prayer remains with a person until the subsequent prayer, just like the daytime meal sustains him until he eats the evening meal.

והסדר הזה מהנפש כסדר המזון מהגוף, מתפלל לנפשו ונוון לגופו, ומתמדת עליו ברכת התפלה עד עת תפלה אחרת, כהתמדת כוח סעודת היום עד שיסעד בלילה...

PART C. CHANGE YOURSELF, NOT GOD

Since Judaism teaches that God runs the world, what difference does it make if we pray? It seems strange to ask God for things that He already knows we want. Furthermore, if He hasn't given us what we want yet, He probably has a good reason; can prayer really change God's mind?

While we cannot change God with our prayer, we can change ourselves. This is one way in which prayer can change our lives.

1. Rabbi Yosef Albo, Sefer Ikarim (translated by Isaac Husik), from Rabbi J. David Bleich, Ed., With Perfect Faith, pp. 267-269 – If God has already decreed that one will receive a certain benefit, why should he pray? Alternatively, if God has not decreed that this should happen, can prayer change His plan?

Either God has determined that a person shall receive a given benefit or He has not so determined. If He has determined, there is no need for prayer; and if He has not so determined, how can prayer avail to change God's will that He should now determine to benefit the person when He had not so determined before? For God does not change from a state of willing to a state of not willing, or vice versa. For this reason they say that the worthiness of an action does not help a person receive any benefit from God. And

אם נגזר מהשם טוב מה על איש או לא נגזר. ואם נגזר אין צריך תפלה, ואם לא נגזר איך תועיל התפלה לשנות רצון השם לגזור עליו טוב אחר שלא נגזר, שלא ישתנה השם מן הרצון אל לא רצון, ולא מלא רצון אל רצון, ובעבור זה יאמרו שלא יועיל כשרון המעשה אל שיגיע לאדם מהשם בעבורו טוב מה, וכן שאמרו שלא תועיל התפלה להשיג טוב מה או להנצל מרע שנגזר עליו.

similarly, they say that prayer does not help one to receive a benefit or to be saved from something bad which has been decreed against him.

But this opinion is not true, for the influences from above come down upon the recipient when he is on a certain spiritual level and state of preparation to receive them. And if a person does not prepare himself, he withholds this good from himself. For example, if it has been determined from on High that a person's crops shall prosper in a given year, and he neglects to plow or sow his land that year, then God may bring the most abundant rain upon the land but his crops will not prosper, seeing that he has not plowed or sowed. He withheld the good from himself because he did not prepare himself to receive it ... In the same way, when a certain evil is determined upon someone, it is also conditional upon either his being wicked in a certain degree, or to his being predisposed to it.

As for the objection that the Divine Will cannot be changed by prayer, the answer is that it is the Divine Will in the first place that the decree should be realized if the person in question continues in the same state, and that the decree should be changed if the person's state changes.

וזה הדעת איננו נכון, שההשפעות העליונות יושפעו על המקבל בהיותו במדרגה ידועה והכנה ידועה לקבלם, ואם לא יכין האדם עצמו לקבל השפע ההוא הנה הוא המונע הטוב מעצמו, שאם נגזר על איש מה על דרך משל שיצליחו תבואותיו בשנה פלונית והוא לא יחרוש ולא יזרע בשנה ההיא אף אם ימטיר השם מטרות עז על פני תבל ארצו לא תצלחנה תבואותיו אחר שלא חרש וזרע והוא המונע מעצמו הטוב ההוא שלא הכין עצמו לקבלו... וכן כשנגזר עליו רע מה הנה הוא נגזר בהיותו במדרגה ידועה מהרוע או בהכנה ידועה...

ואין להקשות ולומר איך ישתנה רצון השם יתברך על ידי התפלה, שכך היה רצון השם מתחלה שתתקיים הגזירה בהיותו באותה מדרגה ואותה הכנה, ואם תשתנה ההכנה תשתנה הגזירה.

Changing ourselves changes the world. When we prepare ourselves for God's blessing, we will receive the goodness He wishes upon us.

2. **Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pikuda, Kad HaKemach, Translation by Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel, pp. 662-663 – Prayer can change Heavenly decrees and save us from danger.**

The power of prayer is so great that it can even change the course of nature, save a person from danger, and nullify a Heavenly decree. That prayer can change the course of nature may be gathered from the case of Rivkah (Rebecca) whose barrenness was removed by prayer. Prayer can also save a person from danger as it is written ... "For He commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves. They mounted up to the heaven, they went down to the deeps; their souls melted away because of trouble. They cried unto the Eternal in their trouble ... He made the storm calm, so that the waves were still." (Tehillim/Psalms 107:25-28). Thus, prayer protects at a time of danger. Similarly, it is within the power of prayer to nullify a Heavenly decree against a person, as was with the case of Chizkiyahu, King of Judah.

גדול כח התפלה אפילו לשנות הטבע ולהנצל מן הסכנה ולבטל הנגזר. לשנות את הטבע ממה שכתוב (בראשית כה) ויעתר יצחק לה' וגו'... וכן להנצל מן הסכנה ממה שכתוב... ויאמר ויעמד רוח סערה... יעלו שמים ירדו תהומות נפשם ברעה תתמוגג ויצעקו אל ה' בצר להם... יקם סערה לדממה ויחשו גליהם (תהלים קז:כה-כט) הרי שהתפלה מגינה על הסכנה. וכן כח התפלה לבטל הנגזר... מחזקיהו...

PART D. WALKING WITH GOD

The very act of praying to God has value in that it changes our perspective on reality, helping us to live with God in His world. The very act of prayer is itself valuable in that it involves us with God and makes us aware of His involvement with us.

1. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Derech HaShem (The Way of God, Translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan), pp.65, 287 – Through prayer we connect to spirituality even while immersed in the physical world.**

The deeper plan of God's wisdom ... was to arrange things so that even though man must be immersed in the physical, he should be able to attain perfection through his worldly activities and the physical world itself. It is precisely through these that he attains a pure and lofty state, and it is therefore his very lowliness that elevates him. For when he transforms darkness into ... sparkling brilliance, he is then able to attain unparalleled excellence and glory ... [However] the more he becomes entangled in worldly affairs, the more he darkens himself spiritually and divorces himself from the highest light. God therefore prepared a remedy for this, namely, that man should initiate all worldly endeavors by first bringing himself close to God and petitioning Him for all his worldly needs ... This initiation is most important for all human effort. When a person subsequently engages in various forms of human activity, he will not become entangled and immersed in the physical and material world.

עומק יותר יש בענין, כי הנה האדון ברוך הוא... להיות לו עסק בעולם וליקשר בעניניו, וזה ממה שמקיימו במצבו האנושי... והנה זה באמת מצד אחד ירידה לו ולעניניו, אבל היא ירידה המצטרפת לו, וגורמת לו עליה אחרי כן... כי הנה כפי מה שירבה להסתבך בעניני העולם, כך מתרחק מן האור העליון ומתחשך יותר. והנה הכין הבורא יתברך שמו תיקון לזה, והוא מה שיקדים האדם ויתקרב ויעמוד לפניו יתברך וממנו ישאל כל צרכיו... ותהיה זו ראשית כללית ועיקרית לכל השתדלותו, עד שכאשר יימשך אחר כך בשאר דרכי ההשתדלות, שהם דרכי ההשתדלות האנושית, לא יקרה שיסתבך וישתקע בגופניות וחומריות.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III.

- ⌘ The purpose of prayer is not just to present God with your wish list. So too, viewing the successful prayer as a function of those wishes being fulfilled misses the essence of what prayer really is.
- ⌘ God wants to bestow goodness on the world. He set up a system whereby the channel for that goodness to get here is controlled by prayer.
- ⌘ Since God already knows what we want and what would be good for us, the point of prayer cannot be to 'change His mind.' Rather, the point is to change ourselves into worthy recipients of God's blessings.
- ⌘ When we pray we connect to God and the spiritual realm of existence. This in and of itself is a worthwhile endeavor despite the "results" in practical terms.

SECTION IV. ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMUNAL JEWISH PRAYER

Jewish prayer began with the recitation of informal prayers in the times of the Avot. The exact wording of the prayers remained the choice of the individual until much later in Jewish history. In the Second Temple period, prayer was formalized with the compilation of the *siddur* (a Jewish prayer book) and arranged prayer times.

PART A. COMMUNAL PRAYER AND COMPILATION OF THE SIDDUR

These days, Jewish prayer has a specific and structured form. We pray from a siddur, and the words and times for prayer have been standardized. But this was not always the case. Here we will give a brief summary of how it came to be.

1. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 1:1 – The Torah did not specify the wording of prayer or the times to pray.**

The number of prayers is not decreed by Torah law; the wording of the prayers is not decreed by Torah law; and prayer does not have prescribed times decreed by Torah law.

ואין מניין התפלות מן התורה ואין משנה התפלה הזאת
מן התורה ואין לתפלה זמן קבוע מן התורה:

2. **Ibid. 1:3 – Originally, prayer was up to the individual.**

If a person was fluent in prayer he would make many supplications and requests. But if it was difficult for a person to pray, he would pray what he could and at a time he wished. Similarly, the number of prayers that a person would pray depended upon his ability to pray; some people would pray once a day and some twice daily, and others even several times; and everyone prayed in the direction of the Temple (in Jerusalem) from wherever they stood. This was the practice from Moshe Rabbeinu until the time of Ezra.

אם היה רגיל מרבה בתחנון ובקשה ואם היה ערל
שפתים מדבר כפי יכולתו ובכל עת שירצה, וכן מנין
התפלות כל אחד כפי יכולתו, יש מתפלל פעם אחת
ביום, ויש מתפלל פעמים הרבה, והכל יהיו מתפללין
נכח המקדש בכל מקום שיהיה, וכן היה הדבר תמיד
ממשה רבינו ועד עזרא.

3. **Ibid. 1:4 – During the exile that followed the destruction of the First Temple, the need arose to compose a coherent prayer that could be used by those no longer fluent in Hebrew.**

After the First Temple was destroyed by the evil Nebuchadnezzar and the Jewish people were exiled, they became mixed amongst the Persians, Greeks, and other nations. They gave birth to a new generation of Jews in these countries, and these children lost the ability to express themselves clearly in Hebrew and they mixed many languages into [their prayers]. They became unable to express themselves properly in one language.

כיון שגלו ישראל בימי נבוכדנצר הרשע נתערבו בפרס
ויוון ושאר האומות ונולדו להם בנים בארצות הגוים
ואותן הבנים נתבלבלו שפתם והיתה שפת כל אחד
ואחד מעורבת מלשונות הרבה וכיון שהיה מדבר אינו
יכול לדבר כל צורכו בלשון אחת אלא בשיבוש...

They were not able to speak Hebrew as well as their national languages. Because of this, they abbreviated their prayers, whether requests or praises of God, which they made in Hebrew, to the extent that they started to mix foreign languages into their prayers. When Ezra saw this, he and his Court established the order of the Eighteen Blessings. The first three blessings consist of praise to God, the last three express thanks to God, and those in between contain requests for the basic needs of each individual and the community as a whole. The fixed prayer was therefore established to enable those who had difficulty expressing themselves, to pray with clarity.

ואינם מכירים לדבר יהודית וכלשון עם ועם ומפני זה כשהיה אחד מהן מתפלל תקצר לשונו לשאול חפציו או להגיד שבח הקדוש ברוך הוא בלשון הקדש עד שיערבו עמה לשונות אחרות, וכיון שראה עזרא ובית דינו כך עמדו ותקנו להם שמנה עשרה ברכות על הסדר, שלש ראשונות שבח לה' ושלש אחרונות הודיה, ואמצעיות יש בהן שאלת כל הדברים שהן כמו אבות לכל חפצי איש ואיש ולצרכי הציבור כולן, כדי שיהיו ערוכות בפי הכל וילמדו אותן ותהיה תפלת אלו העלגים תפלה שלימה כתפלת בעלי הלשון הצחה, ומפני ענין זה תקנו כל הברכות והתפלות מסודרות בפי כל ישראל כדי שיהא ענין כל ברכה ערוך בפי העלג.

4. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb (Translated by Dayan Dr. I Grunfeld), pp. 625- 626 – The siddur provides structure in a turbulent world).**

When Israel dwelt upon its land, life everywhere clearly appeared as being borne by God... But Israel stood before the long period of wandering, scattered and despised among the nations, robbed of all national character, hardly admitted to possess human character, having but Torah, and the spirit of Torah as its only possession. A crushing of the spirit under the torture of worldly troubles was to be foreseen. A substitute had to be found for the Temple and all the spiritual levers that spring from it... Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly set the Divine service of the world into a firmer form by compiling Israel's Book of Prayer (Siddur).

5. **Rabbi Shimon Schwab, Iyun B'Tefillah, Introduction – The entire gamut of Jewish prayer was initiated by our Sages.**

Our present-day specific text, which is called *matbei'ah shetavu Chachamim*, a formula coined by the Sages, originated with the Men of the Great Assembly, and is therefore of Rabbinic origin. This includes the order of the prayer, the laws and text of the prayer *Kaddish*, *Barchu*, *Kedushah*, the *Amidah*, communal prayer, blessings, *Kiddush* and *Havdallah*, etc.

For more on the origin and standardization of Jewish prayer, see the Morasha class entitled, "Overview of the Amidah, Part I."

PART B. INSTITUTION OF THE TIMES OF THE PRAYERS

Although the Avot introduced the concept of praying at different times during the day, the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers were not formalized until the Second Temple. The timing of the prayers was instituted to correspond to the *Avodah* in the Temple.

1. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 1:5 – Morning and Afternoon Service.**

The Great Assembly also established that the number of prayers would correspond to the number of times the daily sacrifices were offered

וכן תקנו שיהא מנין התפלות כמנין הקרבנות, שתי תפלות בכל יום כנגד שני תמידין וכל יום שיש קרבן מוסף תקנו בו תפלה שלישית כנגד קרבן מוסף,

in the Temple. Therefore, two daily prayers were instituted corresponding to the two daily offerings, as well as an additional service corresponding to the third offering, which was brought on special occasions.

The morning prayer, which corresponds to the morning *Tamid* offering, is called *Shacharit*. The afternoon service is called *Minchah*, and corresponds to the afternoon *Tamid* offering. The additional prayer service for special occasions is called *Mussaf*.

ותפלה שהיא כנגד תמיד של בקר היא הנקראת תפלת השחר, ותפלה שכנגד תמיד של בין הערבים היא הנקראת תפלת מנחה, ותפלה שכנגד המוספין היא נקראת תפלת המוספין.

2. *Ibid*, 1:6 – Evening Service.

The Great Assembly also established that there would be one prayer service in the evening, since parts of the afternoon sacrifice would be consumed on the altar throughout the night...

וכן התקינו שיהא אדם מתפלל תפלה אחת בלילה שהרי איברי תמיד של בין הערבים מתעכלין והולכין כל הלילה...

See also the Morasha class entitled, Overview of the Amidah, Part I.

PART C. MINYAN

Praying in public is considered especially virtuous. The power of the group seems to make the prayer more readily acceptable before God.

1. *Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 8:1 – There is special merit to communal prayer.*

Communal prayer is always heard. Even when there are transgressors among [the congregation], the Holy One, blessed be He, does not reject the prayers of the many. Therefore, a man should attach himself to a community and not pray individually; at every opportunity he should pray together with the community.

תפלת הציבור נשמעת תמיד ואפילו היו בהן חוטאים אין הקדוש ברוך הוא מואס בתפלתן של רבים, לפיכך צריך אדם לשתף עצמו עם הציבור, ולא יתפלל ביחיד כל זמן שיכול להתפלל עם הציבור.

While men and women are equally required to pray to God each day, adult Jewish males must do so in a quorum of ten (*minyan*). This obligation does not apply to women who may fulfill their mitzvah to pray where they want.

2. *Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism*, pp. 432-433 – While both men and women are required to pray every day, only men must do so with a minyan.

The essence of prayer is internal. It develops the personal and private relationship between God and His creations. Some of the greatest examples of prayer took place in complete privacy. Moses prayed to God to forgive the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf as he stood alone on Mount Sinai. In Biblical times, a woman name Hannah prayed in solitude for a child that she desperately wanted. She later became the mother of the prophet Samuel. In fact, many of the laws of prayer are derived from her heartfelt prayer.

Both men and women are obligated to pray to God every day. Women are not obligated, however, to participate in the public, external manifestations of communal prayer, rather in the ideal form (for women): individual prayer. In fact, even a brief personal prayer would fulfill a woman's obligation to communicate daily with God. Men, who by nature are less private and internal, are obligated to pray with a community in the synagogue. The Jewish legal definition of the minimum unit for such a community is ten adult males. Since women are not obligated in the communal form of prayer, they cannot form the quorum for the fulfillment of the obligation.

For more on minyan and the woman's role in communal prayer, see Ner Le'Elef's booklet entitled "Women's Issues: Book Two," Section 3, Chapter B.

PART D. THE LANGUAGE OF PRAYER

Jewish prayers are composed and conducted in Hebrew. Is this a necessary feature of prayer? Does God really care what language we pray in?

1. Mishnah, Sotah 7:1 – Prayer may be recited in any language.

The following may be said in any language... prayer.

אלו נאמרין בכל לשון... ותפלה.

Although the Mishnah states that prayer may be recited in any language, the Talmud discouraged people from praying in the vernacular of the time, ancient Aramaic.

2. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 33a – Prayer should not be recited in ancient Aramaic.

May prayer be said in any language? But Rav Yehudah said that a person should not pray for his needs in Aramaic because Rabbi Yochanan said that the ministering angels don't pay attention to anyone who prays in Aramaic since the ministering angels don't understand that language. This is not a contradiction; one [law] applies to an individual, the other to communal prayer.

ותפלה בכל לשון והאמר רב יהודה לעולם אל ישאל אדם צרכיו בלשון ארמית דאמר רבי יוחנן כל השואל צרכיו בלשון ארמי אין מלאכי השרת נזקקין לו לפי שאין מלאכי השרת מכירין בלשון ארמי לא קשיא הא ביחיד הא בצבור.

Rashi explains that angels assist in bringing an *individual's* prayers before God. *Communal* prayer, though, is not in need of the assistance of an intermediary, because God Himself accepts the prayers of the community. For this reason, when one prays to God individually, one should preferably do so in Hebrew.

3. Rambam, Commentary on the Mishnah, Sotah 7:1 – It is preferable to pray in Hebrew when praying privately.

In which circumstances [may one pray in any language]? In public prayer, but an individual should strive to pray to God only in Hebrew.

במה דברים אמורים בצבור, אבל היחיד ישתדל מאד שלא יתפלל לה' אלא בלשון העברי.

But what is someone to do if they want to pray privately but do not know Hebrew?

4. **Rabbi Yosef Karo, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 101:4 – One can pray the standard Jewish prayers in any language.**

One can pray in any language that he wishes; and this is in a congregation, but when praying alone one should only pray in the Holy Tongue. And there are those who say that this applies when he is asking for his needs, as when he is praying on behalf of a sick person or due to some trouble related to his household that he has, but when praying the prayer established for the congregation [of Israel - i.e., everyone], even one praying alone can recite the prayers in any language.

יכול להתפלל בכל לשון שירצה, וה"מ בצבור, אבל ביחיד לא יתפלל אלא בלשון הקודש; וי"א דה"מ כששואל צרכיו, כגון שהתפלל על חולה או על שום צער שיש לו בביתו, אבל תפלה הקבועה לצבור, אפילו יחיד יכול לאומרה בכל לשון.

But still, if someone wants to offer a personal plea to God in their own language, does Judaism really not recognize such an act as prayer? There is more hope:

5. **Ibid. (Citing Rabbeinu Asher to Berachot, Chapter 2) – Someone praying alone can do so in any language.**

And there are those who say that even one praying alone when asking for his needs can nonetheless pray in any language that he desires...

ויש אומרים דאף יחיד כששואל צרכיו יכול לשאול בכל לשון שירצה...

It appears that one may pray in any language, whether privately or in public, whether the standard prayers or one's own requests. (See Tosefot and Meiri, Shabbat 12b regarding Aramaic). Nevertheless, it is still preferable to pray in Hebrew, the Holy Tongue.

6. **Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, Mishnah Berura, Orach Chaim 101:4:13 – One cannot substitute a foreign language for prayer in Hebrew on a permanent basis.**

The best way to perform the mitzvah is only in the Holy Tongue (Hebrew) ... That they gave permission to pray in any language is only on occasion, but to establish it as a permanent thing and to set up a prayer leader [to pray in another language] and to cause the Holy Tongue to be forgotten completely - this is totally unacceptable.

ומצוה מן המובחר הוא דוקא בלשון הקודש... דמה שהתירו להתפלל בכל לשון היינו דוקא באקראי אבל לקבוע בקביעה תמידית ולהעמיד שליח ציבור ולהשכיח לה"ק לגמרי זה אי אפשר בשום אופן.

7. **Rabbi Nosson Sherman, The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Introduction – There is inherent holiness to Hebrew, the language of creation.**

That prayer is soul-talk, that it represents man at the summit of his aspirations for holiness, helps us understand why the language of prayer is Hebrew. It is true that the Sages allow prayer in any language (Talmud, Sotah 33a), but this is not a blanket permission, nor does it equate Hebrew, the Holy Tongue, with other languages. The Jewish legal authorities frown upon prayer in other languages (see the Code of Jewish Law). The commentator Nachmanides (Exodus 30:13) shows that Hebrew is the language God used in creating the universe and the language of prophecy; that he explains, is why it is called the Holy Tongue. That alone helps explain why the prayers have greater sanctity if they are uttered

in Hebrew. The commentators note that no translation can capture all the nuances of the prayers, or the prophetic words of God or the sacred compositions of the Great Assembly and their sublime successors down the ages...

Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, writes: It is known in Kabbalistic literature that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were created first of all. Thereafter, by use of the letters, the Holy One, Blessed is He, created all the worlds. This thought is hidden in the first phrase in the Torah, "In the beginning God created *et*," the Hebrew word *et* spelled by joining *aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, with *toph*, the last letter -- that is, God's first act of creation was to create the letters from beginning to end, *aleph* to *toph*...

The 22 sacred letters are profound, primal, spiritual forces. They are, in effect, the raw material of Creation. When God combined them into words, phrases and commands, they brought about Creation, translating His will into reality. There is an analogy in the physical realm: one type of combination of hydrogen and oxygen produces water, while another produces hydrogen peroxide. So it is with all the elements and their infinite possible combinations. Similarly, there is a Divine science in the Hebrew alphabet. The Book of Creation, the early Kabbalistic work ascribed to the Patriarch Abraham, describes how the sacred letters were used as the agency of Creation. The letters can be arranged in countless combinations, by changing their order within words and interchanging letters in line with the rules of various Kabbalistic letter-systems. Each rearrangement results in a new blend of the cosmic spiritual forces represented by the letters...

The same explanation applies to the language of prayer. The Great Assembly had the ability to combine letters, verses, and ideas in ways that unlock the gates of heaven. Their composition of the prayers is tantamount to an act of creation, which is why it is so important not to deviate from their language and formulation. This is not to denigrate the importance of comprehension and emotional involvement. Prayer in the language one understands is sanctioned by the Sages themselves, and surely, a well-understood prayer is immeasurably more worthy than one that is merely mouthed as a string of uncomprehended sounds. Nevertheless, this does not detract a whit from the importance of praying in the Holy Tongue; it merely points out the responsibility to understand the prayers in their original, holiest form.

One who cannot pray in Hebrew should make efforts to learn to do so. In the meantime, such a person can rely on any one of the many authentic translations of the siddur that are available for purchase these days.

8. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim, Volume 4, Chapter 70:4 – Until a person learns Hebrew, he should pray in his vernacular from an authentic translation of the siddur.

Until he has learned the Holy Tongue, he should recite the prayers from the printed English. And it is a good idea to find a translation made by someone who knows well how to keep Torah and mitzvot.

עד שילמוד בלשון הקודש יאמר נוסח התפלה באנגלית שנדפסו וטוב למצא תרגום לאנגלית ממה שתירגם מי שידוע לשומר תורה ומצות ביותר.

No matter what language we use, words offered to God with sincerity will make their way to Him, as the following story demonstrates.

Jeff was visiting Norway and somehow found an opportunity to come to Israel. He decided it's now or never and he came. Of course, once a Jew gets here he's got to come to Jerusalem. And once he's in Jerusalem he has to see the Old City and the Western Wall, the last vestige of the Temple Mount during the Second Temple Era, nearly 2,000 years ago. It is the holiest Jewish site in the world.

When he gets to the Wall, he is amazed. Like so many others, he "feels" something. He is unprepared. He thought he would see some old stones... an archeological site. But he felt something that he could only describe as "heavy." He had some sort of spiritual experience.

He tells me, "You know, Rabbi, it's true. I am an atheist, but somehow a prayer came out of me that day. And it went like this:

'God, I don't believe in You, I don't know that You exist. But I do feel 'something,' so maybe... just maybe... I'm making a mistake. It is a possibility. And if I am making a mistake, I want You to know that I'm not fighting You, I have no quarrel, and I have no reason to be against You. It's just that I don't know that You exist.' 'God,' the prayer continues, 'I still think I'm just talking to a wall, but 'just in case' You are really there, and I am making this mistake, then do me a favor and get me an introduction.'"

Jeff finishes this prayer of his and slowly, in reverence, backs away from the Wall. Just then, he feels a hand on his shoulder. He is so startled that he jumps up in the air. He turns around and snaps at the fellow who touched him, "What's the idea of putting your hands on me. What kind of nerve..." The fellow is very apologetic, "I saw you praying and I just wanted to ask you if you wanted to visit a yeshivah." "What's a yeshivah?" asks our hero. So the fellow blurts out, "A yeshivah is where you learn about God."

Jeff looks at me and continues his story: "When this guy said that, it was as if he hit me right between the eyes! I had just finished asking God for an introduction and here is a guy pulling me by the shoulder and saying, 'Come on, I'll introduce you to God.' So -- of course I'm gonna come. But that guy really deserves no medal for bringing me here. He didn't do a thing. Maybe God brought me here.

A year later, Jeff came back to Israel and told me the end of his story. He said that one day, during that previous summer, when he was studying here in the Old City, he saw a very pretty, sweet, religious girl walking by. (He could tell she was religious because even though it was summer, she was dressed very modestly.)

He said to himself, "Look at the charm this Jewish girl has. May the Almighty help me meet a nice Jewish girl like this." He didn't say a word to her. Weeks later he went back to Harvard. One Shabbat morning he walked into a synagogue and actually ran into the same girl he had seen in Jerusalem. He had to say something, of course. "It can't be," he said, "but you look like somebody I saw last summer in Jerusalem, in the Old City." She replied, "Yes, I was there... and I saw you, too."

You guessed it. They are now married and living in New Jersey. Jeff was an atheist, but he got his prayer answered on the spot. Why? There can be only one explanation. "The Almighty is near to all those who call unto Him, to all those who call unto Him in truth." (Tehillim/Psalms 145:18) [From "What The Angel Taught You" by Rabbi Noach Weinberg and Yaacov Solomon, pp. 68-71.]

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV.

- ≈ Originally there were not any set times nor any standard text for Jewish prayer. But with the exile and subsequent assimilation, the Sages of Israel saw a need to standardize prayer.
- ≈ The three daily prayers, although initially founded by our forefathers, were established by the Men of the Great Assembly to correspond to the daily sacrifices that had been offered in the Holy Temple.
- ≈ The mitzvah to pray applies equally to men and women alike. Adult Jewish males also have a mitzvah to pray three times daily with a minyan, a quorum of ten men. Since women are not subject to this obligation, they may pray wherever they prefer.
- ≈ God understands whatever language we pray in. It is ideal to learn to pray in Hebrew.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHY IS PRAYER SUCH A CENTRAL FEATURE OF JEWISH OBSERVANCE?

Prayer is the heritage of the Jewish people, going all the way back to the first Jews. The impulse to pray to God was ingrained in our ancestors who instinctively turned to God in prayer.

Additionally, it is a mitzvah to pray. For Jews, men and women alike, it is a mitzvah to pray every day. But even for non-Jews, prayer is an essential aspect of faith in God. That is why our Holy Temple in Jerusalem was called, “the House of Prayer for all the Nations.”

WHAT IS THE JEWISH UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER?

Judaism views prayer as an act of introspection that focuses us on our relationship with God. We do this by involving ourselves in conversation with Him, understanding that He is keenly interested in our lives.

DO OUR PRAYERS REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE? DOES GOD REALLY ANSWER OUR PRAYERS?

The point of prayer is not just to get what we want. God knows what we want and what would be good for us without our asking for it. However, since prayer is the switch to release God’s goodness, it has a profound effect on what happens in our world.

Additionally, prayer can have a profound effect on us as well, changing us into more fitting recipients for God’s blessings.

And regardless of tangible results, the closeness to God achieved through the act of prayer is valuable in and of itself.

WHY WAS JEWISH PRAYER FORMALIZED INTO THE SIDDUR?

Originally, people prayed using whatever words came to them. But after the destruction of the first Temple and the assimilation that occurred due to the exile that followed, the Jewish leaders at the time saw a need to standardize the text of Jewish prayer.

WHY ARE JEWISH PRAYERS ALL IN HEBREW? DOES GOD REALLY CARE WHAT LANGUAGE WE PRAY IN?

Of course God understands whatever language in which we pray. But the Jewish prayers printed in the siddur are not simply “standardized” – they are works of spiritual beauty constructed in the language of creation. Certainly, one should understand what one is praying and for that reason the Sages always permitted people to pray in whatever language they knew. Nevertheless, it is always preferable to pray in the Holy Tongue.