



PRAYER: ANYTIME, ANYWHERE

BY: RABBI MORDECHAI RHINE – TORAH LINKS OF CHERRY HILL

The mitzvah of prayer is one of the most versatile mitzvahs that a Jew can perform. It can be observed in both happy and sad times. Both long and short prayers qualify for the fulfillment of this mitzvah, and it can be done in any language. Let us examine this amazing concept of communication with G-d.

THE SOURCE OF THE MITZVAH

Although prayer is mentioned in many places throughout the Torah and Jewish Scripture, we will examine the description of prayer that is found in the *Shema*. The Torah tells us:

*“You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with your life, and with all your assets... to listen to the commandments...and to love Hashem, your G-d, **and to serve Him with all your heart.**” (Deuteronomy/Devorim 6:5 and 11:13)*

The Talmud asks: What is the service of the heart?

The Talmud replies: Certainly it means prayer.

Although one can technically observe the mitzvah of prayer by merely reciting the text of a prayer, prayer is actually meant to be an expression of the heart, an expression of one's innermost feelings. Through prayer we express ourselves and maintain ongoing communication with G-d.

Prayer is a mitzvah to be performed at least one time a day. The concept of praying three times daily is something that we will examine shortly.

A SECOND SOURCE FOR THE MITZVAH

There is a second source for the mitzvah of prayer, which is described as “prayer in the time of need.” This mitzvah requires us to recognize G-d as the Al-mighty, the source of all power and resources, and to turn to Him for all our needs.

The Torah states:

*“When there will be a war in your land upon the oppressor who oppresses you, **you shall sound the trumpets and you will be remembered before G-d, and you will be saved from the enemy.**” (Numbers/Bamidbar 10:9)*

The expression “you shall sound the trumpets” is understood as a call to prayer, and as a sound that accompanies prayer, much as the shofar of Rosh Hashana is linked to the prayers of the day. Although this source does not dictate a daily requirement for prayer, it does require that we turn to G-d in prayer in our time of need.



JUST SAY SHEMA II

From Prayer to Practice



APPRECIATING THE MESSAGE OF THE MITZVAH

On a basic level, the message of prayer is that “prayer helps”. G-d wants us to succeed so He requires of us that we pray daily, and that we pray especially in our time of need. Interestingly, the impetus for G-d listening to our prayer is not our righteousness, but rather the sincerity of the request. *“G-d is close to all that call to Him; to all that call to Him with sincerity.”* (Psalms/Tehillim 145:18)

Additionally, the mitzvah of prayer ensures that we maintain an ongoing, daily relationship and communication with the Creator. G-d did not create the universe in order to ignore it. This is especially true when we live in challenging times. When we turn to G-d in prayer we express the recognition that He still runs the world and cares about what happens to us.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato explains that whenever we use our G-d given talents to accomplish something, we are at risk of forgetting G-d and thinking that we are most powerful. As the verse states, “Lest you eat and be satisfied, and you will build homes and settle. And your cattle will increase, and your silver and gold will be much, and all that you own will increase. And your heart will become haughty, and you will forget Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out from the land of Egypt, from the place of slavery.”

When we preface an endeavor with a prayer, we recognize that our success comes from G-d. When we do succeed, we feel closer to G-d, rather than having our success distance us from Him.

PRAYER BASICS

As we have seen, the Torah’s description of prayer is to pray once daily, and to turn to G-d in prayer in our time of need. The concept of praying three times a day is the result of human devotion. Each of the Patriarchs expressed themselves and their life mission through a specific type of prayer. Avraham instituted the morning prayer; he was the dawn of our people. Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer, which is often recited just before darkness. Yaakov, who instituted the nighttime prayer, is known as the Patriarch who prepared for and survived exile that is symbolized by darkness.

Technically, one can fulfill the mitzvah of prayer with any text, and in any language. Jewish tradition, however, provides the Siddur/prayer book as a source of much needed guidance. When things are going well, for example, it’s doubtful if one would feel the need to pray for good health, livelihood, and the ultimate redemption.

Likewise, in times of challenge we would probably forget to give praise and thanks for all the blessings that there are in our lives. The Jewish prayer book provides us with the gift of balance, to ensure that our communication and relationship with G-d remains nurtured on all fronts.

Regarding praying specifically in Hebrew, it is certainly something to be encouraged. There are, however, other factors to be taken into consideration. For a person to feel satisfaction from prayer and to be motivated to continue, it may require that they pray in a language that they are more familiar with.



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AN OVERVIEW OF DAILY PRAYER

As mentioned earlier, practical Jewish observance involves prayer three times a day. The following is a brief overview of some of the highlights that you will find in the prayer book. (Page numbers refer to the standard ArtScroll Siddur.)

- The Morning Blessings (p. 14-21) this section begins with the blessing upon washing hands in the morning. It continues with the blessing of thanks for our bodies functioning properly, the blessings of the Torah, and the fifteen blessing of thanks and prayer which itemize in a most beautiful way many of the “small” things in life for which we are thankful.
- Verses of Song (p.54-83) this section helps us focus on the grandeur of creation and the Creator. By doing so we set the tone for the prayers that follow. Once we appreciate creation, we have a greater perspective of G-d, before Whom we are praying.
- Blessings of Shema (p. 84-97) this section contains blessings about Torah, creation, and redemption, as well as the actual *Shema*. You will notice the commandment of prayer mentioned in the beginning of the second paragraph (P. 90-95).
- Amidah/Shemoneh Esrei (p. 98-119) this section is the heart and soul of the daily prayer service. It begins with praise and recognition of G-d, continues with requests, and concludes with expressions of thanks.

The highlights that we have described here are for the morning prayer. The afternoon and evening service also feature the Amidah, and the evening service contains the *Shema* and blessings of *Shema* similar to the morning service.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT

The Hebrew word for prayer- *Lhispallel*- finds its root word in the word *Pallel*, which means, “to judge”. To better understand the connection between prayer and judgment, one needs to better understand the role of a judge.

When two parties come before a judge to adjudicate their dispute, the role of the judge is not to discover evil in one party or the other. Rather, his role is to clarify the validity of their arguments and to issue a just and truthful ruling.

In a similar vein, when we approach G-d in prayer we may do so with a sense that we are in disagreement with the way G-d is running His world. Perhaps we don't like the illness that has befallen a loved one or that a certain loss of income was unjustified. Prayer is an opportunity for two parties - G-d and man - to meet and to create dialogue between them. It is not “judgment” in the sense of discovering evil in one of the parties. The purpose of the dialogue is to express ourselves and to plead our case. Sometimes G-d may truly “disagree” with our assessment. In that case we remind ourselves that even if the “disagreement” was not resolved in the way we wanted, G-d is a most attentive listener. No prayer is ever wasted.

