

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



PASSOVER'S SECRET OF SUCCESS

By Sara Yoheved Rigler

How to jumpstart
your personal exodus.

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How to jumpstart your personal exodus.

Shimon E., a 16-year-old Israeli Shotokan karate champion, was in Philadelphia with eleven other Israeli boys for his first international competition. He had trained long and hard, but eying his opponents, especially the Japanese contingent, he felt daunted. The Japanese contenders seemed to have karate in their blood.

What did he have in his blood? Suddenly it hit him: He had not seen any of the contenders pray. Although Shimon was not religious, he intuited that he should ask God for help. At the beginning of each match, he prayed for Divine assistance. Shimon scored victory after victory; by the end of the tournament, he was #1 in his division in Israel and #2 in the world.

As Shimon described it years later, his prayer was not a magic formula to strengthen himself or disable his opponent. Rather, it simply expressed his recognition that God is the ultimate causal factor. Of course, had he not trained hard, his victory would have been impossible. But watching many sports competitions had shown him that human effort even augmented by tremendous talent did not always spell success.

He concluded that unlikely victories as well as startling defeats are determined by the Divine.

Many years ago, my husband and I invested most of our savings in a mutual fund called Tiger. Tiger was run by Julian Robertson, who was rated one of the smartest and sharpest fund managers in the world. Robertson's genius quickly proved itself. In a short time, our investment tripled. We were euphoric.

No matter how smart or how hard we work, success and failure are ultimately in the hands of God.

Then, literally overnight, Tiger plunged. It had something to do with the Japanese selling off yen. I never understood the intricate economics of it, but suddenly all our gains had vanished. Robertson wrote a letter to his investors explaining how this unforeseen debacle of a single day could not have been anticipated even by his expertise, and how he planned to restore Tiger to its former glory. The final bombastic sentence of the letter made me cringe. Robertson assured his investors not to worry, because "This Tiger will roar again."

It didn't. Within several months the fund was defunct.

Robertson didn't realize what 16-year-old Shimon knew: that God is the ultimate causal factor. Although human effort is essential, no matter how smart we are or how hard we work, victory and defeat, gain and loss, success and failure are ultimately determined by God.

Crying Out

Our ancestors in Egypt took a long time to grasp this crucial point. During 116 years of slavery and 80 years of sadistic oppression, it did not occur to them to appeal to God. Assimilated into the majority culture, our ancestors worshipped the idols of that time and place. They descended almost to the lowest level of spiritual impurity, forgetting the one Supreme Power taught by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead, they looked for their salvation to political changes, such as the advent of a new, more compassionate Pharaoh.

Only when Pharaoh died and his successor continued his oppressive policies did our ancestors despair of any amelioration of their condition through natural means. Only at that point, the Torah testifies, did they "cry out" to God. The next verse tells us that God immediately initiated the process of the Redemption.

The "crying out" that catalyzed the Exodus from Egypt was not what we would call prayer. They pronounced no words, no lengthy supplications, no eloquent appeals for Divine mercy. Rather, their crying out was a simple, inarticulate turning to God as the only source of salvation. Yet that basic recognition jump-started all the miracles of the Exodus.

What the Gas Attendant Knew

The Twelve-Step Program is the world's most successful treatment for serious addictions and compulsions. I once accompanied an alcoholic friend to an AA meeting in Boston. The first speaker to address the large group introduced himself as Tom, a recovering alcoholic. He was dressed like a gas station attendant. "Every morning," Tom declared, "I get on my knees and beg God to get me through another day without alcohol." At that point, he had been dry for 22 years.

The first two steps of the Twelve-Step Program are: 1) To admit that you are powerless (over alcohol or overeating or internet addiction or whatever) and 2) to believe in a Higher Power who can liberate you. The next ten steps lay out an arduous program of "fearless moral inventory," admitting wrongdoing, making amends, etc. The Twelve-Step Program requires tremendous commitment and effort, but it starts with the simple, adamant recognition that God, and only God, is in ultimate control.

I wish that Julian Robertson had known what Tom knew.

Gift of Freedom

To accomplish anything — to win a karate tournament, strike it rich, score high on a test, marry the spouse of your dreams, get admitted to the college/grad school/med school of your choice, find a good job during a recession, or overcome psychological and emotional bondages — you have to work hard. Along with (not instead of) that effort, you have to know that God runs the world.

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Passover is the holiday of the Divine give-away. To receive the gift of atonement on Yom Kippur and the ensuing joy on Sukkot, we have to do the arduous inner work of repenting for and rectifying our bad behavior. To receive the gift of the Torah on Shavuot, we have to "count the Omer," working our way up through the 49 levels of spiritual refinement. The gift of inner freedom on Passover, however, is a freebie. On Seder night, God bestows on all Jews the possibility of redemption from whatever inner bondage holds them. It's like winning the lottery.

Of course, to win the lottery you have to exert yourself to the extent of going to a lottery booth and buying a ticket, looking up the winning number, and showing up to claim your prize. To become worthy of the Exodus from Egypt, our ancestors had to exert themselves to the extent of slaughtering the Passover Offering and smearing its blood on their doorposts. Today, to become worthy of the liberation afforded by Passover, you have to exert yourself to the extent of attending a Seder, eating the requisite amount of matzah, drinking the four cups of wine, and carefully fulfilling the other mitzvahs of the Seder.

Decide before the Seder, "What am I enslaved to?"

To claim your Passover gift of inner freedom, two other steps are necessary: Decide before the Seder, "What am I enslaved to?" The possible answers are many: anger, peer approval, materialism, jealousy, self-destructive habits, fear of commitment, impulsivity, resentment, laziness, desire to control, dishonesty, a critical nature as demanding as any taskmaster, etc. Then, during the Seder, as you eat

your matzah in silence, commit to striving to accomplish that change and appeal to God to free you from that particular bondage.

This does not preclude working hard every day to overcome that bondage. But achieving true freedom requires admitting that what really catalyzes the process of inner liberation is the recognition that God, and only God, is the source of that liberation —and of everything else.