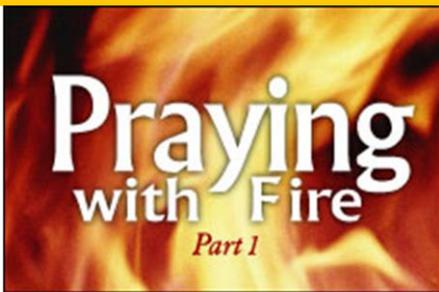


PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS



Praying with Fire Part 1

by Chana Nestlebaum

Ten Lessons on maximizing prayer during the Ten Days of Repentance.

Adapted from - [Praying With Fire: A 5-Minute Lesson-a-Day](#), written by Rabbi Heshy Kleinman, published by ArtScroll\Mesorah. The book offers an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of prayer, providing both knowledge and inspiration for using this unique gift to its maximum potential.

There are times when God's ear, so to speak, is far more inclined toward us. By way of analogy, think of the sun. It shines from its spot in the heavens every day, but in mid-summer, we experience its rays far more powerfully than we do in mid-winter. It's the same sun, burning at the same intensity, and yet at certain times, we are able to grab a lot more of its heat and light.

The ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur -- known as the Ten Days of Repentance (*Aseres Yemei Teshuva*) -- are a kind of spiritual "summer solstice." They are designated as "a time of favor" for forging a connection with God. Our prayers during this time carry a power and impact that we would have to work far harder to achieve during the rest of the year, and that is because God is, figuratively speaking, leaning so much closer to us.

So, if ever you've wanted to pray, or if you already do pray, this is the time to make the most of it. The ten short articles in this series are meant to be read one at a time on each of the Ten Days of *Teshuva*.

Each will add to your understanding of why and how prayer works, and what this means to your own life and the lives of those you love. Now, when God's hand is reaching out to His people, it is the perfect time for us to reach out to meet His grasp.

Day 1

Doing What Comes Naturally

From the second little Leah came into the world, her mother, my good friend Rosie, was a changed woman. The old Rosie always had plenty to keep her busy. She was a top-notch reporter who was on the phone day and night, getting the last bit of information for her story. Whatever time she had left, she spent beating me on the tennis court, or vegetating blissfully on the Jersey shore.

The new Rosie had but one desire and one activity on her mind -- to care for little Leah. She couldn't give enough. Even when the baby was sleeping, she would coax her to open her tiny mouth and nurse. If the baby fell asleep on the job, Rosie tickled her feet and stroked her chin and got her going again. When Leah cried, Rosie went through a check-list of possible causes. Hungry? No, she just ate. Diaper? Looks OK. Too hot? Too cold? Maybe it's a little indigestion. If all else failed, she would drape the baby across her lap and pat her back until they both fell asleep.

And what did Leah do to deserve this round-the-clock total loving care? Nothing much. She just got born. That was enough to release in Rosie's heart a deep, unconditional desire to give all she had to ensure her child's health, comfort and sense of security. Whenever Leah uttered a cry of need, Rosie's purpose became to fulfill it. It didn't matter if Leah was pleasant or cranky that day. It didn't matter if she cooperated with nap time or kept up a colicky vigil all day and night.

It doesn't matter to God, either. A mother's care for her child is only a microscopic shard of the grandeur of God's care for His creation. Anyone who looks squarely at the world around him can see this loving care everywhere. God didn't just create the birds, bugs, fish and animals. He embedded in nature a food for each species, a habitat for each to live in, and the instincts to enable them to access their survival needs. Of the millions of life-forms that comprise the earth, not one is without its source of sustenance. And these gifts are maintained on an ongoing basis each day.

Man is no exception to this outpouring of God's loving care. The right combinations of oxygen and hydrogen for breathing and drinking, the intelligence to farm, invent, form families and societies, the amazing intricacies of our physical selves and the inspiring awareness of our spiritual selves are all eloquent testimonies of God's love for us.

Clearly, He is a Giver. All He is looking for from us is a little cry, a little peep from his children to express to Him that they are in need of something. Like a mother who hears her child's cry, His inherent quality of compassion is automatically activated by even a quiet plea. God desires our prayers. But it's not because he needs them in order to understand what we are lacking. He is, after all, omniscient. He awaits our cry because it is so necessary for us -- so good and uplifting for us -- to have the experience of turning to Him.

God cares for each individual. A verse in the book of Daniel explains that our ability to request things from God doesn't come as a reward for our good behavior, but rather as a simple expression of God's goodness: "For not because of our righteousness do we pour out our supplications before You, but because of Your great compassion."

We don't need to be perfect, or even close to it, to call out to God in prayer. We just have to reach for the lifeline He is always extending to us and grab on, confident that at the other end is the Source of everything we could ever need.

Day 2

Free Anytime Hours

Recently, my friend Elizabeth lost her cell phone on a visit to London. She was desperate. She felt cut off from the world. How could anyone reach her? What if her daughter went into labor? It could be hours before she found out. Her need to stay connected to all the disparate strands of her life was completely and painfully frustrated.

By the time she returned home, the cell phone crisis had grown to such immense proportions in her mind that, jet-lagged and surrounded by unpacked suitcases, she delved immediately into a search for the best plan. In that process, she rose to a new level of frustration. Roaming charges, free nights, anytime hours, overseas rates -- there were so many variables to keep in mind, it seemed almost impossible to make an informed choice. But in the end, she worked it out and chose a plan. She simply had to. Being without a connection was not an option.

For the human soul, being without a connection to God is far more painful still. A person may have no idea where the restless, empty feeling comes from when it rises up inside him in the middle of some otherwise pleasant event. But what his mind doesn't recognize, his soul knows quite well.

In the very first chapter of the Torah (Genesis), in which the creation of the world is described, we discover the root of this spiritual yearning to connect. In describing the creation of the first human being, the Torah relates that God blew a "spirit of life" into man, and "man became a living soul." What was that "spirit of life" that animated man? His life force is his soul -- his spirituality. God invested mankind with a breath of Divine spirit, making him the only creature that exists in the physical world and yet is animated by a spiritual essence. We human beings are hybrid creatures, carrying around a powerful pulse-beat of Heavenly energy in our "ashes and dust" bodies.

This is an intense force we have inside us, and it doesn't want to lie dormant. It wants to express itself and reinforce itself by connecting with its source, and it needs a means by which it can fulfill these desires. The power of speech is the means.

One classic Torah commentator explains that the "living soul" refers to a "speaking soul," for it is man's ability to reason and speak that sets him apart from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Speech is a physical act that does a spiritual job. It enables us to pray, and through prayer, we fulfill our soul's need to reconnect itself to its Divine source. That means that when a person prays, he is tapping into the essence that makes him uniquely human, and reaching beyond his immediate world of work and play, pain and pleasure, into a sphere that transcends it all. He lets his soul's desire lead the way, and it feels right, because it's what he was created to do.

But the most awesome factor in this whole awesome concept is the total access a human being has to God, any time he wants to pray. In prayer, a person's desire to communicate is never frustrated by any fees, rules, restrictions or roaming charges. He can't lose his service or use up his battery. And his connection is loud and clear--24\7.

There's just one requirement -- sincerity. Regarding our connection with God, Psalms promises us the kind of faultless service Cingular and Verizon would never dare promise: "God is close to all who call, to all who call Him in truth." And with that, you're connected.

Day 3

The World's Operating System

"What do you think of this?" Ellen wrote me in an email. "I was talking to Lisa on the phone, and she told me that she went to the supermarket with her daughters and she couldn't find a parking space. So she prayed for one. She prayed for a PARKING SPACE," she repeated, lest I miss the emphasis.

Lisa had become religious, and even though all of us were proudly Jewish, everyone thought she had gone off the deep end. I was the sounding board for everyone's complaints about Lisa because I had already been religious for many years, without any apparent ill effects on my sanity.

"You think God doesn't do parking spaces?" I emailed back. "If He can create the world, He can probably find Lisa a parking space. Did she get one?"

I was a little flippant, I guess. I knew that the email correspondent was really saying that it seemed odd and inappropriate to approach the Almighty for something so trivial. But nothing happens in this world without a prayer to activate it. It's as if the whole world is New York City without electricity. The offices are there, the factories are there, the street lights and subways are all there, lying still and dark. Prayer switches on the power, and suddenly, the wheels are whirring and the city is buzzing with activity.

Prayer is woven into the very fabric of Creation and designed by God to be a fundamental element of life. In describing Creation, the Torah states that "All the plants of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herbs had not yet sprouted, because God had not brought rain to the earth and there was no man to work the soil." It was all just sitting there, latent, like New York City without power.

Why was man needed to get the world's garden growing? Couldn't God have done the job Himself? The famous medieval commentator known as Rashi explains that without man, there could be no rain. Adam had to arrive on the scene, recognize that rain was needed and then pray for it. God

constructed the world in a way that would require man to ask Him for everything he needed. He put in our hands the power, through prayer, to draw blessing down from Heaven and into our lives. And in doing so, he ensured our constant connection to Him. We will always need, and He will always be the One we turn to.

So deeply is this ingrained into the nature of the world that, according to another commentator, no matter how incredible a benefit a person derives from his prayers, it can't be considered a miracle. (Yes, Ellen, prayer can even open up a parking space). Answered prayers are simply an indication that the world is operating as God designed it to operate.

Sources in the Talmud inform us that every blessing a person is ever destined to receive in his lifetime is "stored" for him in Heaven. If someone is meant to be rich, that wealth awaits him. If he's meant to have five children, their souls are awaiting their moment to be born. His health, his future spouse, whatever he needs to fulfill his purpose in life is well within God's ability to deliver....if he prays.

Like Adam standing upon a parched earth packed with potential, we have to recognize that what we need comes from Heaven, and verbally make our request of God. Only then can our lives come to full fruition.

Day 4

Saying What You Mean and Meaning What You Say

A person studying the Torah for the first time would come to the conclusion that the Jewish women require an outright miracle in order to bear a child. Three out of four matriarchs -- Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel -- all spent years praying and crying to God for the gift of children.

The figure of Chana, mother of the prophet Samuel, was another famous Biblical case of childlessness. The Book of Samuel records Chana's pilgrimage to a holy place, where she quietly poured out her heart with such emotion that the priest who observed the scene accused her of drunkenness. When she explained that it was not wine that caused her to spill the contents of her heart, but rather the overwhelming longing she held inside, the priest blessed her that her prayers would be answered. And they were, with the extraordinary child who grew up to serve the Jewish people as a prophet.

There is nothing like raw fear, deep longing, emotional or physical pain to sharpen a person's focus on Heaven. And in fact, God treasures these profoundly emotional prayers. They achieve exactly what prayer is meant to achieve; the person has shed his ego, shed his illusions that he controls destiny, and placed himself completely in God's care. The connection between the person and his Creator, in the midst of this type of deeply felt prayer, is so strong and electric that it alone can provide the courage and comfort to face even the most difficult situation.

When someone prays with such intensity and sincerity, right from his heart, his prayers are heeded. It's true that they the petitioner may not receive the exact answer he hopes for (a subject for a later article), but such prayers will surely change something, and often, they change everything.

Even in modern times, we have seen the kinds of miracles that the women of the experienced. There is one famous story recorded of a childless woman who traveled to the gravesite of the matriarch Rachel, which is located in Bethlehem, to pray for alleviation of her plight. She didn't have special prayers to say. She just spoke her heart. "Mama Rachel," she pleaded, "You know what it's like to be childless. Can't you help me?"

On the other side of the partition, the revered leader of a Jerusalem yeshiva, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, had been reciting his own prayers. Overhearing the woman's simple plea, he sent a student to the woman's home with the message: "Your prayers have been accepted in Heaven. You will have a boy next year and I wish to have the honor of holding the baby at his bris." And so it was.

Was Rabbi Shmuelevitz himself a prophet? How could he have been so sure of this woman's fate? It was axiomatic in his mind that such a sincere and humble prayer would be answered.

Unfortunately, we tend to believe that God doesn't enter the picture until all other options are exhausted, and then we acknowledge that "there's nothing we can do but pray." But the same God that fixes things up when they've gone terribly wrong also makes things go right. We have the power to keep them going right by praying with meaning and emotion. Whether a person speaks to God in his own words, or uses a translation of the Hebrew liturgy, or recites the Hebrew, or employs some combination of these forms of prayer, the key element is his heart.

There is a traditional story of an uneducated young boy who entered a venerable old synagogue on Yom Kippur and set out to pray among its elite congregants. Having had no opportunity to learn how to pray, he made a deal with God. "All I know is the alef-beis (the Hebrew alphabet)," he said. "You know what's in my heart. Please take the letters I say and make the right words out of them." And so he stood with the swaying, chanting congregation and recited out loud, much to their annoyance, "alef, beis, gimel, daled...." Suddenly, the rabbi, who was a great leader known for his otherworldly connections, stopped the prayers. Gazing straight at the now terrified boy, he announced, "There had been a terrible decree in Heaven against our community. But because of this boy's prayers, it has been rescinded."

God doesn't fall for smooth talk. But when we come to Him as His children, looking for nothing more than His love and protection, He finds us very hard to resist.

Day 5

You Can't Fail

You move into your new home on a lovely acre of wooded land. One day, a visitor appears at the door. He's the son of the original owner of the house. "I have something you should see," he tells you. He extracts an ancient looking document from his pocket and removes the Saran wrap he used to protect it. It's a letter from his father -- long deceased -- stating that there is a large cache of gold, valued at \$450,000 as of July, 1953, buried in the back yard.

"Are you sure this is for real?" you ask the man.

"My father was a very honest man. He never lied. If he says it's here, it's here. I'll go 50-50 with you on the cost of excavating the yard, and of course, 50-50 on whatever we find."

"But we have no idea where it is. There are huge old trees we would have to cut down and a whole lawn we would have to turn over," you argue, but then you answer your own argument. "On the other hand, when we find the money, I can replant the yard in no time, with plenty of money left over. It's probably worth millions by now!"

Knowing the treasure is there, knowing that if you dig up every square inch of the yard you will find it, you proceed with dogged perseverance. Nothing will deter you. You know if you keep going, you'll succeed.

The Talmud teaches that there is just as certainly a treasure inside each of us. It is the power of prayer. It is a treasure for practical reasons -- it is the means by which we access the blessings Heaven has in store for us. And it is a treasure for more transcendent reasons -- it's the expression of our soul, our connection to the Divine, and our essential purpose as spiritual beings in a material world.

The problem with this treasure is that many people have no idea where it's buried. They may not even know it's there. That is why it is vital to know that the Talmud guarantees us that it is there. With that knowledge, you can strive to reach it, filled with confidence that you will succeed. It is not true that some people are spiritual and others are not. By definition, every human being is spiritual. The only question is how far down in his being he buries this core aspect of himself. Every person, with effort, can reach higher spiritual levels than he might ever imagine.

Practically speaking, this means assessing where prayer stands in your life right now, and trying to take a small step upward. Someone who never prays might start by just taking five minutes out in the morning to tell God what's on his mind. Someone who is already familiar with the standard Jewish liturgy might seek out a new prayer book that has translations and commentaries that will give him better insight into what he's saying. Anyone at any stage can begin applying a more mindful focus to the meaning of the words he says, starting with one part of one prayer, and continuing onward from there.

At this time of year, God looks for movement from us. The Book of Life is for those who show that they are living -- moving, learning, improving, trying. There's no need to ever quit in despair, thinking "This is never going to work for me." The Sages of the Talmud state unequivocally that it will work, that if we keep digging, the result will be a life overflowing with spiritual riches.

Adapted from [Praying With Fire](#) (ArtScroll) by Rabbi Heshy Kleinman