

Samuel Field Y Adult Center
Introduction To Individual Prayer

Questions:

1. Is prayer meant to benefit Man or benefit G-d?
2. Is prayer a right or a privilege?
3. Does G-d answer all prayers?
4. Why pray using a fixed text?

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Question: Is prayer meant to benefit Man or to benefit G-d?

Initially animal sacrifices were viewed as the manner in which Man serves G-d. What does it mean to serve G-d? It can be compared to being a “fan.” A fan can be described as someone who wants to know all he can about his idol. Jews are not “fans” of idols. Jews are “fans” of G-d. To demonstrate our loyalty to G-d, G-d demanded that the Jewish people bring a morning animal sacrifice and an identical sacrifice in the afternoon. Those two sacrifices were known as the Korban “Tamid.” The word “Tamid” means always. In the context of sacrifices, the two daily sacrifices were brought every day no matter if the day was a holiday. Once the Second Temple was destroyed, our sages needed to find a substitute for the two daily mandatory sacrifices. They found that substitute in the fixed prayers. As a result, our recital of the fixed text is our “Korban Tamid”; our way of demonstrating our allegiance as fans of G-d.

Notwithstanding the daily sacrifices in the Temple and the fixed prayers that replaced those sacrifices, personal prayers were always welcomed and encouraged.

Question: Is prayer a right or a privilege?

Judaism believes that man does not have a right to pray to G-d. The privilege of approaching G-d in prayer was granted to man in the merit of the forefathers of the Jewish People, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Each of those is credited with instituting the practice of serving G-d through prayer at different times of the day. Abraham started the morning prayer service. Isaac instituted the afternoon service and Jacob instituted the night service. That is why the primary fixed prayer, known as Shemona Esrei, the prayer of 18 benedictions begins with a reference to those forefathers.

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Question: Does G-d answer all prayers?

This is what Jakob J. Petuchowski, writes on page 40 of the book: Understanding Jewish Prayer:

Put differently, the same thought may be expressed by saying that G-d's "answer" to man's prayer need not invariably be an affirmative answer. G-d must also be thought capable of saying "No." Perhaps this is indeed the difference between engaging in magic and engaging in prayer. Magic, by definition, *must* work. If it does not yield results, then, in the view of the practitioner of magic, something must have gone wrong with the performance of the magical rite; and he will repeat the rite in a more careful and meticulous manner. Prayer, on the other hand, is addressed to a G-d who has a will and a mind of His own. G-d cannot be manipulated by man. He can only be *addressed*. He may, or may not grant a specific request. But there is no mechanism of man's devising which could compel Him to do so. In addressing G-d, man knows that a "No" can be as much of an "answer" as a "Yes."

Question: Why pray using a fixed text?

This is what Jakob J. Petuchowski, writes on page 24 of the book: Prayerbook Reform In Europe:

The fixed times of prayer, he says, are part of "the order of the divine will." They are an immeasurable aid to us when we are in no mood to pray, and by thus forcing oneself to pray he may be saved from the danger of losing the ability to pray altogether. Again, the fixed liturgy may admittedly be nothing more than a makeshift arrangement. Ideally, perhaps, man should pray in his own words, and the liturgical formulae were fixed only when, because of the Exile, men had lost the art of spontaneous prayer. But that is only part of the story. If reciting the words of the liturgy is a "prayer of empathy" (man deriving inspiration from the words on the page in front of him), and is thus contrasted with the prayer of "self expression," we ought to remember that even in the latter, man is making use of words and words are by nature external. Why not, then, use the words which have proved to be efficacious by millennial use?

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Six Forms Of Jewish Prayer

1. Spontaneous prayer;
2. Prayer in times of difficulty;
3. The fixed prayers (the Siddur);
4. Personal prayers that are added to the fixed prayers;
5. Non-verbal acts of prayer-sitting, standing, bowing, Shofar blowing, etc.
6. Vows.

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Spontaneous prayer

Maimonides-It is a positive commandment to pray each day as it is written: and you shall serve G-d. From divine inspiration, they taught that service is prayer as it is written: And to serve Him with all your hearts. Our sages said: what is service of the heart? That is prayer. And the number of prayers to pray each day is not decreed by the Torah; and the wording of the prayers is not decreed by the Torah and the Torah does not set forth a set time each day for prayer.

Therefore, women and slaves are obligated to perform the mitzvah of praying because it is a positive commandment that does not have a fixed time but the way to perform this obligation is in this way: that a person should supplicate and pray each day and should state the praise of G-d and then should ask for his needs that he needs by request and by supplicating and then should give praise and thanks to G-d for the good that G-d bears to him, everyone according to his ability.

If he was accustomed to praying, he should say much supplication and requests. But if he had difficulty expressing himself, he should speak to the best of his ability and whenever he could and the number of times he prays should be according to his ability. There were those who prayed once a day; there were those who prayed several times a day. Everyone should pray facing towards the Holy Temple no matter where he is situated. And that is the way things were from the time of Moses to the time of Ezra.

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Prayer in times of difficulty

Nachmanides-That which was taught in the Midrash Sifrei that the words to serve G-d represent study or prayer did not consist of a commandment but consisted of good advice or to indicate that as part of the requirement to serve G-d we should study Torah or pray to G-d in times of trouble; that our eyes and hearts should be pointed towards G-d in the same manner that servants turn to their masters . This is in line with what we learned (Bamidbar 10, 9): And if you go to war in your land against an enemy who oppresses you, then you shall blow an alarm with the trumpets; and you shall be remembered before the Lord your G-d, and you shall be saved from your enemies. This verse represents the Mitzvah to cry out to G-d in prayer and with Shofar blowing each and every time the Jewish community is faced with difficulties. This was further explained by King Solomon: (Melachim 1, 8, 35, 37-38): When heaven is closed, and there is no rain, etc., If there is in the land famine, if there is pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there is caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatever plague, whatever sickness there might be; Whatever prayer and supplication is made by any man, or by all your people Israel, who shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread out his hands toward this house.

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The Fixed Prayers, The Prayer Of 18 (19) Benedictions

Maimonides-After the Jews were forced into exile by Nebechednezzar the evil one (destruction of first Temple), Jews mingle with the Persians and Greeks and other nations and they gave birth to children in the Nations of the non-Jews. These children found that their spoken language was a combination of many spoken languages. When they would speak, they could not express their whole thought in one language except as a mixture of languages as we learn in Nehemia chapter 13 verse 24: and their children speak half Ashdodite and they did not know how to speak Hebrew. They speak the language of each nation. Therefore when one of them wishes to pray he runs short of Hebrew words with which to ask his needs or to praise G-d in Hebrew and ends up mixing words from other languages. When Ezra and his court noticed this issue, they authored the 18 blessings (shemona esrei) in order; the first three blessings that contain praise of G-d; the last three blessings that contain thanks to G-d; and the middle ones that contain requests for personal needs and communal needs. By establishing the text of the blessings, everyone said the blessings in the same order. As a result, they will study the blessings. The prayers of those who might stammer becomes a complete prayer like the prayer of those who have a strong command of the Hebrew language. And for this reason, they authored all the blessings and prayers so that the blessings and the prayers would be the same text for all so that each blessing would be said correctly even by those who stammer.

Personal prayers that are added to the fixed prayers

At what point in the fixed prayers should personal prayers be inserted. It depends on your view of the fixed prayers- Is prayer meant to benefit Man or to benefit G-d?

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Non-Verbal Acts Of Prayer

Professor Uri Ehrlich-The Non-Verbal Language Of Jewish Prayer

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Professor Urlich may have omitted what is the most important non-verbal aspect of prayer; i.e. who we are. It is improper for us to think that G-d's decision on whether he should respond to our prayer is based on how we act in synagogue. From G-d's perspective, it is how we act outside of the synagogue, in our personal lives and in our professional lives, that determines whether G-d will respond to our prayers.

Avudrohom-The meaning of the words: "we do not know what else to do" is as follows: In the morning prayer service, we performed several non-verbal acts of prayer similar to the non-verbal acts of prayer that Moshe Rabbenu performed when he climbed Mount Sinai and he received the Torah. Moshe Rabbenu relates that at first he sat on the mountain using the Hebrew word that means sitting and then he says that "I stood on the mountain." And then he relates that he fell on his face before G-d. We conduct ourselves in a similar manner. We recite Pseukei D'Zimra in a seated position; then we stand for Shemona Esrei and then we fall on our faces as part of tachanun. That is why we then say: we do not know what else we can do.

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Vows-1

In modern times, vows appear to play a very small role in Jewish prayer. But perhaps it would be better to characterize them as an inadvertent form of prayer. In other words, people still make vows in the form of a prayer but fail to remember that they uttered the vow. For example, if someone hears that a family member has taken ill, we can picture the person saying: please G-d, deliver a cure to X and I will never talk back to him/her. The person then recovers from the illness while the one who made the vow forgets what he had promised.

Vows in the Bible:

Bereishis 28, 20- And Jacob uttered a vow in which he promised: If G-d remains with me, and guards me while I am on the path that I am about to follow and provides me bread to eat and clothes to wear, 21. So that I can return to my father's house whole, then the Lord shall be my G-d.

Bereishis 31, 13- I am the G-d you approached in Beth-El, where you anointed the pillar, and where you issued a vow to Me, now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your family.

The Bible reminds us of the significance of uttering vows:

Bamidbar 30,3-If a man issues a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

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Vows-2

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in her book: *Genesis, The Beginning of Desire*, JPS, 1995, writes about the dangers of not fulfilling vows in a timely manner:

The main statement of the midrash is, of course, that the making of a vow creates a sacred, dangerous reality. To delay fulfilling a vow is not so much a moral issue as it is a question of disturbing an essential balance. Like going on a journey, unaccompanied, or sitting in a house that is about to collapse, the unfulfilled vow suggests a state of disequilibrium: the whole structure may collapse around one's ears, the forces of chaos are free to attack, one has exposed oneself to the baneful stare of the accusing angels.

While solitary journeys and dilapidated houses are obviously dangerous, however, the peculiar peril of the unfulfilled vow needs some clarification. It is as though one has enjoyed a special kind of oral pleasure, as in the quotation from Proverbs: one has eaten of the sacred, of the animals set aside for ritual purposes. To vow is to break a rational limitation, a clear boundary between hand and mouth, as another midrash puts it: "Let your hand [the fulfillment of your vow] be close to your mouth. The Sages said: Let your hand be *in front* of your mouth -- that is, hold the object to be vowed, ready in your hand, *before* uttering vows." If the mouth is not underwritten, as it were, by the hand, if words correspond to nothing, then one finds that one has created a reality-that-is-not-reality.

Language has the power to create such marginal -- sacred and dangerous -- realities. In making a vow, one constructs an image of an intended future, and thereby opens a Pandora's box of conflicts and resistances, of hitherto hidden fears and fantasies: the ledger of one's inner being, in the imagery of the midrash, is exposed to searching angelic gaze. The unbalanced books are audited, and one may find, even if only in subconscious form, the three cardinal sins traced within. The gap between hand and mouth is a perilous space; by bringing trouble after trouble upon him, G-d tries to make Jacob aware of the need to close the gap. But Jacob does not pay attention: he is insensitive to the implications of catastrophe, to the single message encoded in the many blows that rain down on him.