

# "The Efficacy of Prayer"

BJCC

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In this evening of learning we will be looking at some classical and modern sources related to the purpose, use, and power of prayer in Judaism. Where and when does Jewish prayer originate? Why has it become so standardized? Is it meant more for God or for people? Is it, in fact, meant for God at all? Come prepared to look deeply and critically at the Jewish textual tradition, but also with your own thoughts and experiences. As we will see, Jewish prayer is designed to elicit spontaneity and joy, even as it mandates a level of specificity entirely unusual among the world's major religious faiths.

## "The Fire in the Forest"

### A Chasidic Parable

It is told that in every generation there are times when hope threatens to leave this world.

At such times, the Baal Shem Tov would go into a secret place in the forest. There he would light a special fire and say a holy prayer speaking the long-forgotten most sacred name of God. The danger was averted and hope stayed alive.

In later times when disaster threatened, the Maggid of Mezritch, his disciple, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire, but I can say the prayer." And again the danger was averted and hope stayed alive.

Still later, his disciple, Moshe Leib of Sasov, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire or say the prayer, but I found my way to this place in the forest, and that must be enough." And it was. Hope stayed alive.

And later when Israel of Rizhyn needed intervention from heaven, he sat in his chair with his head in his hands and say, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I no longer know how to light the fire, nor how to say the prayer, I can't even find my way to that place in the forest, but I can tell the story and that must be enough." And it was.

And it still is. As long as stories are told, hope stays in the world.

**Mishnah Berakhot 4:3**

**משנה ברכות ד' ג'**

(3) Rabban Gamliel says: Every day a person must pray eighteen [blessings of the *Amidah*]. Rabbi Yehoshua says: [One may say] an abbreviated [form of the] eighteen [blessings]. Rabbi Akiva says: If his prayer is fluent in his mouth, he must say eighteen; and if it is not -- an abbreviated eighteen.

(ג) רבן גמליאל אומר, בכל יום מתפלל אדם שמנה עשרה. רבי יהושע אומר, מעין שמנה עשרה. רבי עקיבא אומר, אם שגורה תפלתו בפיו, יתפלל שמנה עשרה. ואם לאו, מעין שמנה עשרה:

**Mishnah Berakhot 4:5**

**משנה ברכות ד'ה'**

(5) If one was riding a donkey, he should dismount from it [while he prays]. And if he is unable to dismount, he should turn his face [towards Jerusalem]. And if he is unable to turn his face, he should focus his heart toward the Holy of Holies [in the Temple in Jerusalem].

(ה) הנה רוכב על הקמור, ירד. ואם אינו יכול לירד, יחזיר את פניו, ואם אינו יכול להחזיר את פניו, יכון את לבו כנגד בית קדש הקדשים:

**Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Amidah, Response to Prayer 1**

**סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית, עמידה, שומע תפילה א'**

Hear our voice, Lord our God, pity us and have mercy on us and receive in mercy and favor our prayer, for You are a God Who hears prayer and supplication. From Your Face, our King, do not turn us away empty handed, for You hear the prayers of Your people Israel in mercy. Blessed are You, O Lord, Who hears prayer.

(א) שִׁמְעֵנוּ קוֹלֵנוּ. ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ חוּס וְרַחֵם עָלֵינוּ. וְקַבֵּל בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְרַצוֹן אֶת תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ. כִּי אֵל שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלוֹת וְתַחֲנוּנִים אַתָּה. וּמְלַפְנֵיךָ מְלַכְנוּ. רִיבֵנוּ אֵל תִּשְׁכַּחֵנוּ: כִּי אַתָּה שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלַּת עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה:

**I Samuel 1:10-16**

**שמואל א א': י"ט-י"ז**

(10) In her wretchedness, she prayed to Adonai, weeping all the while. (11) And she made this vow: "Adonai tzevaot, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to Adonai for all the days of his life;

(י) וְהָיָה מֵרַת גִּפְשׁ וּתְתַפְלֵל עֲלֶיהָ וּבָכָה תִּבְכֶּה: (יא) וּתְדַר גְּדֵר וּתֹאמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת אִם-רָאָה תִרְאֶה | בְּעֵינַי אֲמַתְּךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא-תִשְׁכַּח אֶת-אֲמַתְּךָ וּנְתַתָּה לְאֲמַתְּךָ זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים וּנְתַתִּיו לָהּ | כָּל-יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ וּמִנְחָה לֹא-יַעֲלֶה עַל-רֵאשׁוֹ: (יב) וְהָיָה כִּי הִרְבֵּתָה

and no razor shall ever touch his head.” (12) As she kept on praying before Adonai, Eli watched her mouth. (13) Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. (14) Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” (15) And Hannah replied, “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to Adonai. (16) Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; **for out of my great anguish and distress have I been speaking all this time.**”

לְהִתְפַּלֵּל לְפָנָי ה' וְעָלִי שִׁמְרָ אֶת־פִּיהָ: (יג)  
 וְחֲנָה הִיא מְדַבֶּרֶת עַל־לִבָּהּ רַק שְׁפָתֶיהָ נִעוֹת  
 וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע וַיַּחֲשֹׁבֶהָ עָלָי לְשִׁכְרָה: (יד)  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ עָלִי עַד־מָתִי תִשְׁתַּכְּרִין הַסִּירִי  
 אֶת־יַיְינָהּ מֵעַלְיָהּ: (טו) וַתַּעַן חֲנָה וַתֹּאמֶר לֹא  
 אֲדוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁה קִשְׁת־רוּחַ אֲנִכִי וַיִּזֶן וְשָׁכַר לֹא  
 שָׁתִיתִי וְאֲשַׁפֹּךְ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לְפָנָי ה' (טז)  
 אֲל־תִּתֵּן אֶת־אֲמַתְךָ לְפָנָי בַּת־בְּלִיעֵל כִּי־מַרְבַּ  
 שִׁיתִי וְכַעֲסִי דַבַּרְתִּי עַד־הַנְּהָה:

**I Samuel 2:1-10**

**שְׁמוּאֵל א ב' א'-י'**

(1) And Hannah prayed: My heart exults in Adonai; I have triumphed through Adonai. I gloat over my enemies; I rejoice in Your deliverance. (2) There is no holy one like Adonai, truly, there is none beside You; there is no rock like our God. (3) Talk no more with lofty pride, Let no arrogance cross your lips! For Adonai is an all-knowing God; by Him actions are measured. (4) The bows of the mighty are broken, And the faltering are girded with strength. (5) Men once sated must hire out for bread; men once hungry hunger no more. While the barren woman bears seven, the mother of many is forlorn. (6) Adonai deals death and gives life, casts down into Sheol and raises up. (7) Adonai makes poor and makes rich; He casts down, He also lifts high. (8) He raises the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the dunghill, setting them with nobles, granting them seats of honor. For the pillars of the earth are Adonai's; He has set the world upon them. (9) He guards the steps of His faithful, but the wicked perish in

(א) וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל חֲנָה וַתֹּאמֶר עָלַץ לִבִּי בַּה' רַחֵם  
 קַרְנֵי בַּה' רַחֵב פִּי עַל־אֹיְבָי כִּי שָׁמַחְתִּי  
 בִישׁוּעָתְךָ: (ב) אִין־קָדוֹשׁ כַּה' כִּי אִין בַּלְתֵּךְ  
 וְאִין צוּר כַּאֲלֹהֵינוּ: (ג) אֲל־תִּרְבּוּ תִדְבְּרוּ  
 גְבוּהָהּ גְבוּהָהּ יֵצֵא עָתָק מִפִּיכֶם כִּי אֵל דַּעוֹת ה'  
 וְלֹא [וְלוֹ] נִתְקַנּוּ עַלְלוֹת: (ד) קִשְׁתׁ גִּבְרִים  
 חֲתָמִים וְנִכְשָׁלִים אָזְרוּ חֵיל: (ה) שְׁבַעִים בַּלְתָּם  
 נִשְׁכְּרוּ וְרַעֲבִים חִדְּלוּ עַד־עַקְרָה יִלְדָה שְׁבַעָה  
 וְרַבַּת בָּנִים אֲמַלְלָהּ: (ו) ה' מִמִּית וּמַחַיֶה  
 מוֹרִיד שָׁאוֹל וַיַּעַל: (ז) ה' מוֹרִישׁ וּמַעֲשִׂיר  
 מַשְׁפִּיל אֶף־מְרוֹמָם: (ח) מְקִים מַעַפָּר דָּל  
 מֵאֲשַׁפֵּת יָרִים אֶבְיוֹן לְהוֹשִׁיב עַם־נְדִיבִים  
 וְכִסָּא כְבוֹד יַנְחִלֵם כִּי לֵה' מַצְקִי אֶרֶץ וַיִּשֶׁת  
 עֲלֵיהֶם תַּבַּל: (ט) רַגְלֵי חֲסִידוֹ [חֲסִידָיו]  
 יִשְׁמֹר וְרַשָּׁעִים בַּחֲשָׁף יִדְמוּ כִּי־לֹא בָכַח  
 יַגְבִּיר־אִישׁ: (י) ה' יַחֲתוּ מְרִיבוֹ [מְרִיבָיו] עֲלוֹ  
 [עַלְיוֹ] בְּשָׁמַיִם יִרְעֵם ה' יַגְדִּין אֶפְסֵי־אֶרֶץ  
 וַיִּסְוֶעַז לְמַלְכוֹ וַיִּרָם קָרוֹ מְשִׁיחוֹ: (פ)

darkness—For not by strength shall man prevail. (10) The foes of Adonai shall be shattered; He will thunder against them in the heavens. Adonai will judge the ends of the earth. He will give power to His king, And triumph to His anointed one.

### Avodah Zarah 7b

**Rav Aḥa bar Minyumi said to Abaye: A great man came from our place**, i.e., from Media, and in response to every matter that he said, the Sages said to him that it would be best if this matter were lost and not stated. Abaye said: There is one instance in which we act in accordance with his opinion, as it is taught in a *baraita* that **Naḥum the Mede says: During the Amida prayer a person may request his personal needs** that are not included in the standard formulation of the *Amida* prayer, in the blessing that ends: **Who listens to prayer.**

### Avodah Zarah 7b

Rav Aḥa bar Minyumi said to Abaye: **Apart from this, as it is dependent on the dispute between great trees.**

### Avodah Zarah 7b

Rav Aḥa bar Minyumi elaborates: **As it is taught** in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Eliezer says: A person should request his own needs first and afterward recite the Amida prayer, as it is stated: “A prayer of the afflicted, when he is faint and pours out siḥo before the Lord. O Lord, hear my prayer”** (Psalms 102:1–2). And *siḥa* means **nothing other than prayer, as it is stated: “And Isaac went out to meditate [lasuah]**

### עבודה זרה ז' ב

אמר ליה רב אחא בר מניומי לאביי גברא רבה אתא מאתרין כל מילתא דאמר אמרי ליה נשתקע הדבר ולא נאמר אמר איכא חדא דעבדינן כוותיה דתניא נחום המדי אומר שואל אדם צרכיו בשומע תפלה

### עבודה זרה ז' ב

אמר בר מינה דההיא דתליא באשלי רברבי

### עבודה זרה ז' ב

דתניא ר' אליעזר אומר שואל אדם צרכיו ואחר כך יתפלל שנאמר (תהלים קב, א) תפלה לעני כי יעטוף ולפני ה' ישפוך שיחו וגו' אין שיחה אלא תפלה שנאמר (בראשית כד, סג) ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה

**in the field”** (Genesis 24:63).

**Avodah Zarah 7b**

**Rabbi Yehoshua says:** One should pray first and afterward request his own needs, as it is stated: **“I pour out *sihi* before Him, I declare before Him my trouble”** (Psalms 142:3), which teaches that first one pours forth his *siha*, and only afterward speaks of his own troubles.

**עבודה זרה ז' ב**

ר' יהושע אומר יתפלל ואח"כ ישאל צרכיו  
שנאמר (תהלים קמב, ג) אשפוך לפניו  
שיחי צרתי לפניו אגיד

**Avodah Zarah 7b**

They disagree with regard to that which **Rabbi Simlai taught.** As **Rabbi Simlai taught:** A person should always set forth praise of God and only then pray for his own needs. **From where do we derive this?** We derive it **from Moses our teacher, as it is written:** **“O Lord God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness, and Your strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on earth, that can do according to Your works, and according to Your mighty acts?”** (Deuteronomy 3:24). Here Moses praises God, **and it is written afterward,** in the following verse, that then Moses requested from God: **“Let me go over, I pray You, and see the good land”** (Deuteronomy 3:25).

**עבודה זרה ז' ב**

כדדריש ר' שמלאי [דדריש ר' שמלאי]  
לעולם יסדר אדם שבחו של מקום ואח"כ  
יתפלל מנלן ממשה רבינו דכתיב (דברים ג,  
כד) ה' אלקים אתה החלות להראות את  
עבדך וגו' וכתוב בתריה אעברה נא ואראה  
את הארץ הטובה

**Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 119:1**

**(1) A person who wishes to add blessings in four sections.**

If he wants to add in each of the middle berachot, something like that berakhah, he may add. How so? If there was a sick person he was asking for mercy over, [he does so]

**אורח חיים קי"ט:א'**

(א) דין הרוצה להוסיף בברכות ובו ד  
סעיפים:

אם רצה להוסיף בכל ברכ' מהאמצעיות  
מעין הברכה מוסיף כיצד היה לו חולה

in the blessing "heal us."

If he needs a living, he would ask in the blessing over the years. And in [the blessing] "who hears prayer" he can ask for any of his needs, which includes all requests.

Hagah [reflect]: And when he adds, he should first recite the blessing and then add, but he should not add and then begin the blessing (Tur 567).

And according to Rabbenu Yona, when he adds to the blessing something like the blessing, if he is adding something on behalf of all of Israel, he would say it in plural language and not singular language, and he should add at the end of the blessing and not the middle.

And if he is asking for his own needs, such as there is a sick person in his home or he needs to earn a living, he may ask even in the middle of a blessing, as long as he does so in the singular and not the plural.

And during the blessing, "who hears prayer" and also at the end of prayer he may ask in either plural or singular, whether this is for his own needs or those of the many.

### **Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit, Concluding Prayers, Alenu 1**

(1) We rise to our duty to praise the master of all, to ascribe greatness to the author of creation, who has not made us like the nations of the lands nor placed us like the families of the earth.

Who has not made our portion like theirs,  
nor our destiny like all their multitudes.

מבקש עליו רחמים בברכת רפאינו

היה צריך פרנסה מבקש עלי' בברכת השנים ובשומע תפל' יכול לשאול כל צרכיו שהיא כוללת כל הבקשו':

הגה וכשהוא מוסיף יתחיל בברכה ואח"כ מוסיף אבל לא יוסיף ואח"כ יתחיל הברכה (טור סימן תקס"ז)

ולהר"ר יונה כשמוסיף בברכה מעין אותה ברכה אם מוסיף אותה בשביל כל ישראל אומר אותה בלשון רבים ולא בלשון יחיד ולא יוסיף אלא בסוף הברכה ולא באמצע

ואם שואל צרכיו ממש כגון שיש לו חולה בתוך ביתו או שהוא צריך לפרנסה יכול לשאול אפילו באמצע הברכה והוא שישאל בלשון יחיד ולא בלשון רבים

ובברכת שומע תפלה וכן בסוף התפלה בין קודם יהיו לרצון בין אחריו יכול לשאול בין בלשון יחיד בין בלשון רבים בין צרכיו ממש בין צרכי רבים:

**סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית,  
סיום תפילה, עלינו א'**

(א) עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל. לְתַת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית. שְׁלֵא עָשָׂנוּ כְּגוֹיֵי הָאֲרָצוֹת. וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ כְּמִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה.

שְׁלֵא שֵׁם חֲלָקְנוּ כְּהֵם וְגוֹרְלָנוּ כְּכָל הַמּוֹנֵם:

For they worship vanity and emptiness and prayer to a god who cannot save.

שָׁהֵם מְשַׁתְּחִיִּים לְהֶבֶל וְרִיק וּמִתְפַּלְלִים אֵל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ:

And we bow in worship and thank the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

וְאֲנַחֲנוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמְשַׁתְּחִיִּים וּמוֹדִים לְפָנָי מֶלֶךְ מְלִכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא:

Who extends the heavens and establishes the earth, whose throne of glory is in the heavens above, and whose power's presence is in the highest of heights.

נְשָׂהוּא נוֹטֵה שָׁמַיִם וְיוֹסֵד אֶרֶץ. וּמוֹשֵׁב יְקָרוֹ בְּשָׁמַיִם מְמַעַל. וְשׂוֹכֵנֵת עִזּוֹ בְּגִבְהֵי מְרוֹמָיִם:

הוּא אֵל קִינּוֹ אֵין עוֹד.

He is our God, there is no other.

Truly he is our king, there is no other. As it is written in His Torah [Deut. 4]: 'You shall know and take to heart this day, that YHWH is God in heaven above and on earth below.

אֱמֶת מְלִכְנוּ. אֶפֶס זּוֹלָתוֹ. כִּכְתוּב בְּתוֹרָתוֹ. וַיְדַעַת הַיּוֹם וְהִשְׁבַּת אֵל לְבַבְךָ. כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מְמַעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת.

אֵין עוֹד:

There is no other.

**Abraham Joshua Heschel**  
**"Prayer" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays***

We dwell on the edge of mystery and ignore it.

We cannot make Him visible to us, but we can make ourselves visible to Him...The purpose of prayer is to be brought to His attention, to be listened to, to be understood by Him; not to know Him, but to *be known* to Him.

To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. Who is worthy to be present at the constant unfolding of time? Amid the meditations of mountains, the humility of flowers--wiser than all alphabets--clouds that die constantly for the sake of beauty, *we* are hating, hunting, hurting. Suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit greatness in nature. It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doing! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.