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WHAT IS PRAYER?

Some Answers from the Jewish Tradition

Selected by

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I. DOES GOD NEED OUR PRAYERS?

"God longs for the prayer of the righteous." Isaac T: Yebamot, 64a.

"We know that praise does not profit Thee,...yet the moral consciousness with which Thou hast endowed us dictates that we acknowledge Thy wondrous favors unto us by praise...according to our ability." Bahya.

"Duties of the Heart," Bakasha, 1040.

"Before they call, I will answer." Bible: Isaiah 65:24.

"If My people...pray...and turn from their evil ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." Bible, II Chronicles, 7:14.

II. DOES MAN NEED TO PRAY?

"The purpose of prayer is to leave us alone with God." Baeck,
"Essence of Judaism," 1936, p. 146.

"Brethern, give me a God, for I am full of prayer!" Frishman, "Ha Yadaata?"
Kol Kitbe, 1951, ii 25.q WHJ,iv.218.

"Prayer sometimes dulls the hunger of the pauper, like a mother's finger thrust into the mouth of her starving baby." Peretz. of SPG, 162.

"In prayer we open the gates of our larger self...God comes in to us and claims his own." Weinstein, "Gentle Rain," 1953, p. 22.

"Pour out your heart before Him." Bible, Psalms, 62.9.

"If I recite my wants, it is not to remind Thee of them, but only that I may be conscious of my dependence upon Thee." Bachya,
"Duties of the Heart," 1040, 8.3.18.

"...Guide me by the light of Thy countenance that I may ever find strength in Thee, my Rock and my Redeemer." Union Prayer Book, 1940. See Talmud; Berakot, 17a.

III. HOW DO WE PRAY? WHEN DO WE PRAY? WHERE DO WE PRAY?

HOW? "Let your prayer be a window to Heaven." Baal Shem Tov.

"Prayer is a conversation with God." Josippon.

"To pray is not the same as to pray for." Montefiore.

"True prayer is only possible when correct notions of God have previously been conceived. Maimonides. "A Guide for the Perplexed." 1190, 3.51.

"At worship, cast down your eyes and lift up your heart." Jose B. Halafra. Talmud: Yebamot, 105b

"When you pray, remove from your heart all worldly concerns." Nahamanides, 1268.

"The significance of the prayers consists not alone in their content but also in their traditional forms, in the verbiage in which they have been bequeathed to us, hence, also in the Hebrew language. This must remain, therefore, with few exceptions, the language of prayer." Geiger, "Israelitisches Gebetbuch," 1854, Introduction, q. Philipson.

"Recite the Shema in any language you understand." Talmud: Berakot, 13a.

"When you address the Holy One, let your words be few." Meir. Talmud: Berakot, 61a.

"The old prayers...in which our fathers poured out their hearts to God, awaken our personal religious sentiments and blend them with the religious sentiments of the ages." Steinthal. h. HaShiloah, 1901. v. 423.

"He who recites his prayer aloud, in order that it may be heard, belongs to those of little faith." Talmud: Berakot, 24b

WHEN? "Out of the depths have I called Thee, O Lord." Bible: Ps. 130:1.

"There are times specially suitable for prayer." Jose B. Halafra.

"It is good to go morning, midday and evening unto the Lord's dwelling..." Apocrypha: II Enoch, 51.4

"Happy shall those men be throughout the earth who shall truly love the Mighty God, blessing Him before eating and drinking." Ibid Sibyl. 4.24.

"And Issac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide." Gen. 24:63.

"Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still." Bible: Ps. 4:5.

WHERE? "A man needs no fixed places to say his prayers, no synagogues; among the trees of the forest, everywhere one can pray." Baal Shem Tov.

"Pray only in a room with windows." Johanan. b. Nappaha. Talmud: Berakot, 4.4.

"Pray in a place set aside for prayer." Ibid.

"In prayer, always associate yourself with the congregation, and say: 'OUR GOD, lead us.'" etc. Abaye, Talmud: Berakot, 30a.

"To be heard, a prayer must be for, or in, a congregation." Judah Halevi, Kuzari, 1135, 3.17.

IV. WHAT DO WE PRAY FOR?

"He who rises from his prayer a better man, his prayer is answered."
Talmud.

"The aim of our worship is the purification, enlightenment, and up-
lifting of our inner selves." S. R. Hirsch, 1836.

"The main thing in worship is the feeling of oneness with God, the
ecstasy with which one serves Him and studies Torah, the attitude
which is free of selfish motivation." Baal Shem Tov. 1795.

"When you pray to God, you need not specify your needs, or indicate
the way of deliverance, as you would to a mortal. God knows better
than you wherein your true welfare lies." Norzi, 1561.

"The righteous pray for the wicked...for the world." Aha, Simon.
Tanhuma, VaYera, #9.

"To pray that the expected baby be a boy is a vain prayer...To pray, on
hearing cries of distress, 'that it be not in my house' is a vain prayer."
Mishna, Berakot, 9.3.

"Lord of the Universe, since both the besieged and the besiegers are Thy
people, answer not, I pray Thee, the curses which they may pronounce
against each other." Honi HaMe'aggel. q. Josephus, Antiquities, 14.2.1.

"Help me, O Father, to break all bonds that imprison the soul. Help me
to set my heart free from selfishness, hatred, jealousy, and enable me
to reveal my better nature." Mendes.

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