



Why Pray?

What is the job of the believer? He can be a teacher, a cyber expert or a farmer. He can be almost anything. But the main job of the believer – between him and God – is his service of prayer. This is what the Torah says, “And you shall love God, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”¹ The service of the heart is prayer.

The precise definition of prayer is the Silent Prayer that Jews say three times a day. Why is this considered service of the heart? After all, the entire body is part of the prayer. Our legs keep us standing and our lips speak. But all of that is preparation. Prayer itself is only in the heart. A person who stands and mumbles some words, off in a different world in his thoughts, barely aware that he is even speaking – ‘kills’ his prayer. “Prayer without intention is like a body without a soul.”²

The World of Intentions

What should be our intention when praying? The basic intention is simple. “Know before Whom you stand.”³ You are standing before the Creator of the world, Who watches over His world and everything in it – always. It is advisable to devote at least a few seconds to this thought before praying.

In addition, we should focus on asking for Divine compassion, as prayer is called in the Talmud, “*rachmei*” (compassion). Life has a way of obscuring where our thoughts should be and we are liable to forget to make requests of God and to thank Him. We can and should ask him for both the simplest of requests and the most sublime – and thank Him for all that He has given us. Nothing should be taken for granted.

Another facet of our focus is awareness of the words that we are speaking, including the simple meaning of the words. (It is advisable to look in the prayer book while praying). There are many more Kabbalistic intentions for prayer, like a ladder that reaches up into heaven. Kabbalists throughout the generations have taught us deep and detailed intentions for prayer. But those intentions cannot replace the simple focus and awareness that we are standing before God, speaking with Him and asking for

¹ Deuteronomy 6:5.

² Tanya, part 1 c. 38.

³ Pirkei Avot 3:1.

His mercy. One of the greatest Kabbalists once said, "After all of my intentions, I want to pray like a small child, making requests of God with simple sincerity."

At the top of the ladder are the pious people, who in their prayer attain a state of divestment of physicality, with no awareness of their body. They are aware only of their souls, pouring out their hearts to God and clinging to Him with devotion. In Hebrew, the word for "prayer," "*tefillah*," means clinging and connection, as in the Mishnah, "*hatofel klei cheres*,"⁴ plastering together vessels of pottery.

Desire and Obligation

Prayer is a commandment. We are commanded to pray and say specific prayers three times a day. But as opposed to other commandments, we cannot pray "just to fulfill our obligation." A person who prays just to check off the item on his to-do list is simply not praying. Prayer is first and foremost a request and one cannot request something just to fulfill an obligation. This explains the saying of the sages, "Do not make your prayer fixed, but rather, requests for mercy and supplications."⁵

According to most opinions, prayer is not one of the 613 commandments in the Torah, but rather a directive of the sages. This is not because it is less important than the other commandments. It is because it is *more* important than them. There are 248 positive commandments, the sum of the organs of the body. Prayer is like the spine that hold up all the organs. Our inner service of God in prayer is the spirit of life that weaves all the practical commandments together into one beautiful tapestry.

We are obligated to pray. But prayer is much more than a mere obligation. The regular daily prayers were instituted by our Patriarchs: Abraham instituted the morning prayer, Isaac the afternoon prayer and Jacob instituted the evening prayer. Just as the Patriarchs prayed although they were not obligated to do so (as the Torah had not yet been given), so we pray from the place deep in our hearts and souls that longs to set all of our dreams and desires before God.

If prayer comes from our hearts and souls, why does God have to command us to pray? God wants this service of our hearts. In the Silent Prayer, following a long list of requests, we say, "Look with favor, Havayah our G-d, on Your people Israel and pay heed to their prayer; restore the service to Your Sanctuary and accept with love and favor Israel's fire-offerings and prayer; and may the service of Your people Israel always find favor." True prayer is an expression of connection and closeness between the person praying and God. God wants us to be connected to Him! This can be likened to the father of a beloved son, who fulfills all of his father's requests. One day the father says, "Your actions are wonderful, but what I really want is an inner connection with you. Please just talk to me. That is what will give me pleasure."

Now we can see that we do not pray for ourselves, in order to get 'gifts' from God. We pray in order to express the innermost connection of our souls to God, the connection

⁴ *Kelim* 3:4.

⁵ *Pirkei Avot* 2:13.

that God desires. So why just pray three times a day? The sages said, “Would it be that a person would pray all day!”⁶

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⁶ *Brachot* 21a.