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Prayer

By Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben [David](fathers.html) (Greg Killian)

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In this [study](study.html) I would like to examine what prayer is, and what praying will accomplish. The [first](one.html) [time](time.html) we see ‘praying’ in Scripture is found in:

***1 Shmuel (Samuel) 1:1-18*** *Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim, of mount Ephraim, and his* [*name*](name.html) *[was] Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephrathite: And he had* [*two*](two.html) *wives; the* [*name*](name.html) *of the* [*one*](one.html) *[was] Hannah, and the* [*name*](name.html) *of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. And this man went up out of his* [*city*](city.html) *yearly to worship and to* [*sacrifice*](korbanot.html) *unto* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *of hosts in Shiloh. And the* [*two*](two.html) *sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the* [*priests*](priests.html) *of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, [were] there. And when the* [*time*](time.html) *was that Elkanah offered, he gave to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and her daughters, portions: But unto Hannah he gave a worthy portion; for he loved Hannah: but* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *had shut up her* [*womb*](thebirth.html)*. And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *had shut up her* [*womb*](thebirth.html)*. And [as] he did so year by year, when she went up to the* [*house of HaShem*](hashem.html)*, so she provoked her; therefore she* [*wept*](mashal.html)*, and did not* [*eat*](eating.html)*. Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why* [*weepest*](mashal.html) *thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy* [*heart*](body.html) *grieved? [am] not I better to thee than* [*ten*](ten.html) *sons? So Hannah rose up after they had* [*eaten*](eating.html) *in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the* [*priest*](priests.html) *sat upon a seat by a post of the* [*temple*](temple.html) *of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*. And she [was] in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said,* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and* [*remember me, and not forget*](amalek.html) *thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *all the days of his life, and there shall* [*no razor come upon his head*](body.html)*. And it came to pass, as she continued praying before* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, that Eli marked her* [*mouth*](body.html)*. Now Hannah, she spake in her* [*heart*](body.html)*; only her lips moved, but her* [*voice*](voice.html) *was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken. And Eli said unto her, How long wilt thou be drunken? put away thy* [*wine*](wine.html) *from thee. And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I [am] a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither* [*wine*](wine.html) *nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*. Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial: for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto. Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html) *grant [thee] thy petition that thou hast asked of him. And she said, Let thine handmaid find* [*grace*](grace.html) *in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did* [*eat*](eating.html)*, and her countenance was no more [sad].*

The root word “pala (Strong’s 06419)l” appears for the [first](one.html) [time](time.html) in the Torah when [Yaaqob](jacob.html) / [Israel](gen-jew.html) says to his son [Yoseph](joseph.html) (after a 22-year absence in which [Yaaqob](jacob.html) thought that [Joseph](joseph.html) had perished):

***Bereshit (Genesis) 48:11*** *And* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html) *said unto* [*Yoseph*](joseph.html)*: 'I had not thought* (pallel) *to see thy* [*face*](body.html)*; and, lo, God hath let me see thy* [*seed*](flower.html) *also.'*

Strong’s Concordance gives the definition of ‘praying’ as:

6419 palal, paw-lal'; a prim. root; to judge (officially or mentally); by extens. to intercede, pray:-intreat, judge (-ment), (make) pray (-er, - ing), make supplication.

According to the great Biblical commentator [known](daat.html) as **Rashi** (ad loc)[[1]](#footnote-1) the word *pallel* means to have [one](one.html)’s mind filled with a thought. In [Hebrew](hebrew.html) grammar, the word *lehitpallel* falls in the category of self-reflexive verbs. This means the word describes prayer as something that you do to yourself; you fill your mind with a thought. Thus, it isn’t so much about the words you utter as it is about getting yourself into the proper mind [space](place.html). I believe Søren Kierkegaard said, “Prayer doesn’t change God, but it changes him who prays.”

If the prime meaning for the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) root word for ‘praying’ is *to judge*, then whom are we judging? We can get a clue to the answer by understanding that the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word ‘palal’ is reflexive, that is, the speaker acts upon himself. From this we understand that ‘praying’ is judging oneself!

It is understood that a person can have only [one](one.html) [*ratzon*](needs.html), only [one](one.html) [desire](needs.html) at a [time](time.html). If we examine our current [desire](needs.html) and ask, “Why do I [desire](needs.html) this thing?” If the answer leads us to an underlying [desire](needs.html), then we need to repeat this question until we arrive at the answer: “I [desire](needs.html) this thing for no other reason than I [desire](needs.html) it”. At this point we understand what is our [ratzon](needs.html), what is our innermost [desire](needs.html). Getting to our [ratzon](needs.html) can be a very difficult and embarrassing ordeal, but the exercise will help us to pray.

For example: I want to earn more money. Why do I [desire](needs.html) more money? I [desire](needs.html) more money because I [desire](needs.html) a [new](new.html) car. Why do I [desire](needs.html) a [new](new.html) car? I [desire](needs.html) a [new](new.html) car in order to attract a young lady. Why do I [desire](needs.html) to attract this young lady? I [desire](needs.html) the young lady because I [desire](needs.html) her. This is the true [ratzon](needs.html), the true [desire](needs.html).

What is a [ratzon](needs.html)? Strong’s defines a [ratzon](needs.html) as:

7522 [ratzon](needs.html), raw-tsone'; or ratson, raw-tsone'; from 7521; delight (espec. as shown):-(be) acceptable (-ance, -ed), delight, [desire](needs.html), favour, (good) pleasure, (own, self, voluntary) will, as... (what) would.

This [ratzon](needs.html) is what motivates us to act in the [world](worlds.html). When we pray we are ‘judging ourselves’ and acting on that judgment.

The Sages derive many of the [rules](rules.html) for praying from Hannah’s prayer. We will therefore look at Hannah’s prayer in a careful manner to attempt to understand how to pray.

Lets start by examining Hannah’s [ratzon](needs.html):

***1 Sh’muel (Samuel) 1:10*** *And she [was] in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, and* [*wept*](mashal.html) *sore.*

Our story opens with a bit of background information that helps us to understand why Hannah had such bitterness of soul. Peninnah had children and Hannah did not. Peninnah provoked Hannah because Hannah had no children. The only way that Peninnah could provoke Hannah, is if Hannah had a [ratzon](needs.html), a strong [desire](needs.html), for children. This [ratzon](needs.html) is what caused Hannah to pray.

When we pray, we pray for the [ratzon](needs.html), for the [desire](needs.html) of our [heart](body.html). That is why a thief will often pray that he not be caught. The incongruity of asking [HaShem](hashem.html) to help a thief commit a crime that [HaShem](hashem.html) has forbidden, never enters the mind of such a person because his [ratzon](needs.html) is so strong. Such a prayer, oddly enough, is often answered. Why is it answered?

[***Psalm***](psalms1.html) ***145:16*** *Thou openest thine* [*hand*](fourteen.html)*, and satisfiest the* [*desire*](needs.html) *of every living thing.*

***Tehillim (***[***Psalm***](psalms1.html)***) 106:15*** *And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.*

So, be exceedingly careful about what you pray for!

Hannah’s [ratzon](needs.html) caused her to pray:

***1 Sh’muel (Samuel) 1:11*** *And she vowed a vow, and said,* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *all the days of his life, and there shall* [*no razor come upon his head*](body.html)*.*

The [first](one.html) rule about praying can be derived from the above verse: Hannah [SPOKE](mashal.html). In order to properly pray, we should [speak](mashal.html). The mental [desire](needs.html) should become manifest in the [world](worlds.html) by our words. As Hannah desired, so she [spoke](mashal.html).

[One](one.html) of the major differences between men and animals is our ability to thoughtfully [speak](mashal.html). We can pray because we can [speak](mashal.html).

Notice that when Hannah [spoke](mashal.html), her lips moved but no sound was heard:

***1 Sh’muel (Samuel) 1:13*** *Now Hannah, she spake in her* [*heart*](body.html)*; only her lips moved, but her* [*voice*](voice.html) *was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken.*

From this, the Sages have learned that the words must be spoken, but they should be inaudible to others.

It is no accident that prayer emanates from the [mouth](body.html), which is in the center of the [body](body.html). From the center comes [Daat](daat.html), that is [knowledge](knowledge.html), or [connection](connection.html). It is our neshama’s[[2]](#footnote-2) [connection](connection.html) with [HaShem](hashem.html)!

It is interesting to note that the [mouth](body.html) is also used for [kissing](mashal.html) and [eating](eating.html). The [mouth](body.html) is used to bless [HaShem](hashem.html). Blessings are a very important form of prayer.

As you begin to learn the blessings, pay attention to the structure.

[One](one.html) great way to learn the blessings is with a “bracha bee”. This spelling bee [type](types.html) game is a great way to learn while having a bit of fun.

The rules are:

1. Leader mentions a [food](food.html), say “Pizza”
2. The others in the group shout out the blessing (e.g. shehacol, hamotzi, etc).
3. The person with the most correct answers wins the bee.

The “official” answers, to be used by the leader, are found in “A Guide to Blessings”, by Rabbi Naftali Hoffner, available through Mesorah Publications for $2.99.

This widely-used Guide to Blessings lists which bracha should be said for hundreds of different [foods](food.html) and drinks commonly available. It also establishes clear priorities for those situations in which [two](two.html) Berachoth appear to conflict. By providing the answers to these everyday questions, the Guide can be of invaluable help to the [Jew](gen-jew.html) in expressing gratitude to [HaShem](hashem.html) for His daily gifts of sustenance. Includes [grace](grace.html) after [eating](eating.html), daily blessings, and blessing for special circumstances.

I highly recommend this book!

## The Pattern Of Prayer

How do we [know](daat.html) *how* to pray? Has [HaShem](hashem.html) given us a clear understanding as to how He [wants](needs.html) to be worshipped? Lets take a look at what the Tanakh[[3]](#footnote-3) says about the [Temple](temple.html) service:

***1 Divrei HaYamim (Chronicles) 28:11-19*** *Then* [*David*](fathers.html) *gave to Solomon his son the pattern of the porch, and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof, and of the upper chambers thereof, and of the inner parlors thereof, and of the* [*place*](place.html) *of the mercy seat, And the pattern of all that he had by the spirit, of the courts of the* [*house of HaShem*](hashem.html)*, and of all the chambers round about, of the treasuries of the* [*house of God*](housegod.html)*, and of the treasuries of the dedicated things: Also for the* [*courses*](birth.html) *of the* [*priests*](priests.html) *and the Levites, and for all the work of the service of the house of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, and for all the[He gave] of gold by weight for [things] of gold, for all instruments of all manner of service; [silver also] for all instruments of silver by weight, for all instruments of every kind of service: Even the weight for the candlesticks of gold, and for their lamps of gold, by weight for every candlestick, and for the lamps thereof: and for the candlesticks of silver by weight, [both] for the candlestick, and [also] for the lamps thereof, according to the use of every candlestick. And by weight [he gave] gold for the tables of Shewbread, for every table; and [likewise] silver for the tables of silver: Also pure gold for the fleshhooks, and the bowls, and the cups: and for the golden basins [he gave gold] by weight for every basin; and [likewise silver] by weight for every basin of silver: And for the altar of* [*incense*](ketoret.html) *refined gold by weight; and gold for the pattern of the* [*chariot*](merkava.html) *of the cherubims, that spread out [their wings], and covered the* [*ark*](ark.html) *of the* [*covenant*](covenant.html) *of* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*. All [this, said* [*David*](fathers.html)*],* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *made me understand in writing by [his]* [*hand*](fourteen.html) *upon me, [even] all the works of this pattern.*

So, [HaShem](hashem.html) gave King [David](fathers.html) the proper pattern for the service. This pattern is preserved in the [synagogue](synagog.html) service and prayers. [HaShem](hashem.html) has *not* left us without a clear understanding of how He [wants](needs.html) to be worshipped.

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[Gospel](mishna1.html) = G-d’s spell = G-d’s story

[Gospel](mishna1.html) = [Oral Torah](orallaw.html)

[Gospel](mishna1.html) = [Jewish people](gen-jew.html)

[Gospel](mishna1.html) = [Mashiach](mashiach.html) ben [Yoseph](joseph.html)

In Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 53:1, we read, "we esteemed him not"? Who esteemed Him not? These are the kings of the [nations](nations.html) of Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 52:15. Who says in v. 4 "He has borne our griefs"? It is the same Kings of the [Goyim](gen-jew.html) in 52:15

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The prayers were instituted to replace the daily offerings.[[4]](#footnote-4)

[Three](three.html) times daily, we say the silent, [standing](mashal.html) prayer. We should approach this with [awe](fear.html), as if we were performing the [Temple's](temple.html) daily offerings ourselves.

Abraham is the forefather who is associated with acts of kindness (chessed) – which is the attribute emblematic of giving. This is why he was the proper forefather to institute Shacharit, the daytime service that defines what we are supposed to do during the day, act and achieve. Yaaqob, who is the greatest of the forefathers, created the first prayer service of the Jewish day, the one that is all about connecting to the Almighty. This also explains why it takes the greatest of the forefathers to establish **Ma’ariv**, the one **non-obligatory prayer service**. Only Yaaqob was capable of establishing an appointment for his children with the Almighty, even though they might never show up for the appointment!

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When planning a surprising evening of romance for his wife, a husband knows that the basic elements might be: Ambiance (e.g. music, candlelight), attention (spending [time](time.html) alone together, ignoring the telephone etc.), and a gift (e.g. [flowers](flower.html)). A neophyte, reading this, might think that it is equally effective to light a candle and blow it out, put on some quiet music an hour later while talking on the phone, then to ignore the phone etc. All of the elements are there - why isn't it "working"?

The answer is obvious to all of us, the "[magic](magic.html)" of the evening depends on a series of loving, affectionate acts, which build upon each other. [Coming](coming.html) home to quiet music, the [lights](lights.html) dimmed, seeing flowers on the table and the phone unplugged sets an environment, which allows the next step(s) to flow more easily.

Actually, we [experience](experience.html) the same thing every morning. Upon waking, we are obligated to wear [Tefillin](tefillin.html), make sure that all of our [four](four.html)-cornered clothes have [tzitzith](tzitzith.html), say Kiryat [Shema](shema.html), say Tefillah.[[5]](#footnote-5) Theoretically, these acts could be performed independently: say Tefillah, put on a [Tallit](tzitzith.html) (and then take it off), say Kiryat [Shema](shema.html), then put on [Tefillin](tefillin.html). However, the Rabbis [created](bara.html) a system, or "order", of performing these [mitzvot](cmds613.html). [First](one.html) we put on a [Tallit](tzitzith.html) (even if we are not technically obligated; wrapped in that, we put on [Tefillin](tefillin.html); we then sing praises of [HaShem](hashem.html), raising the tone of that praise until the [community](community.html) "comes together" for Bar'khu; this takes us to a communal recreation of angelic praise, which leads directly to Kiryat [Shema](shema.html); at that point, if we have properly focused and not been interrupted, the [experience](experience.html) of Tefillah will be very ennobling and elevating. This experiential matrix utilizes the various [mitzvot](cmds613.html) which we must do every day to build an [experience](experience.html) which is greater than the sum of its parts.

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1. Rashi to Genesis 48:11: I had not expected: Heb. לֹא פִלָלְתִּי. I dared not entertain the thought that I would see your face again. פִלָלְתִּי is a word meaning thought, similar to “Bring counsel, deliberate thought (פְלִילָה)” (Isa. 16:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Neshama* is one level of our soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An acronym for Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim. This is how Jews identify what Christians call the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Talmud](orallaw.html) Berachot 26b [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Teffillah is the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word for prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)