

**From the Bible - Examples of Spontaneous and Formal Prayer**

**From Numbers 12, when Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses' authority**

וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ:

5. And the Eternal One came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the Tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forth.
6. And he said, Hear now my words; If there is a prophet among you, I the Eternal One will make myself known to him in a vision, and will speak to him in a dream.
7. Not so with my servant Moses, for he is the trusted one in all my house.
8. With him I speak mouth to mouth, manifestly, and not in dark speech; and he beheld the form of the Eternal One. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?
9. And the anger of the Eternal One was kindled against them; and he departed.
10. And the cloud departed from off the Tent; and, behold, Miriam had become leprous, white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous.
11. And Aaron said to Moses, Oh, my lord, I beg you, lay not the sin upon us, because we have done foolishly, and because we have sinned.
12. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb.
13. And Moses cried to the Eternal One, saying, **Heal her now, O God, I beseech you.**

**From I Samuel 1: 9-13, then 2:1-10**

וַתִּקַּם חַנָּה אַחֲרַי אֲכָלָה בְּשִׁלֹה וְאַחֲרַי שָׁתָה וַיְעָלֵי הַכֹּהֵן יֹשֵׁב עַל־הַפֶּסֶא  
עַל־מְזוֹזֹת הַיֵּכָל יְהוָה: וְהִיא מָרַת נַפֶּשׁ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה וּבָכָה תְּבִכָּה: וַתִּדְרֹךְ  
נֶדְרָה וַתֹּאמֶר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אִם־רָאָה תִרְאֶה בְּעֵינֵי אִמְתֶּךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא־תִשְׁכַּח  
אֶת־אִמְתֶּךָ וְנִתְתָּה לְאִמְתֶּךָ זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְתִּיו לְיְהוָה כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּו וּמוֹרָה  
לֹא־יַעֲלֶה עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ: וְהָיָה כִּי הִרְבֵּתָה לְהַתְּפַלֵּל לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיְעָלֵי שִׁמְר  
אֶת־פִּיהָ: וְחַנָּה הִיא מְדַבְּרַת עַל־לִבָּהּ רַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נִעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמַע  
וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ עָלֵי לְשִׁכָּרָה:

9. So Hanna rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. And Eli the priest sat upon a seat by the gate post of the temple of the Eternal One.
10. **And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Eternal One, and wept bitterly.**
11. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Eternal One of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your maidservant, and remember me, and not forget your maidservant, but will give to your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the Eternal One all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.
12. **And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the Eternal One, that Eli observed her mouth.**
13. **And Hanna spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard;** therefore Eli thought that she was drunk.....

וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל חַנָּה וַתֹּאמֶר עָלַי לִבִּי בִיהוָה רָמָה קִרְנֵי בִיהוָה רָחַב פִּי עַל־אוֹיְבֵי כִי שְׂמֵחֹתִי בִישׁוּעַתְּךָ: אֵין־קְדוֹשׁ כִּי־אֵין בְּלִתְּךָ וְאֵין צוּר כְּאֱלֹהֵינוּ: אֶל־תִּרְבוּ תִדְבְּרוּ גְבוּהָה גְבוּהָה יֵצֵא עֲתָק מִפִּיכֶם כִּי אֵל דְּעוֹת יְהוָה וְלוֹ נִתְכַּנּוּ עַלְלוֹת: קִשֶׁת גְּבָרִים חֲתִים וְנִכְשָׁלִים אֲזָרוּ־חֵיל: שְׁבָעִים בְּלָחִם נִשְׁכְּרוּ וְרַעֲבִים חִדְלוּ עַד־עֲקָרָה יִלְדָה שְׁבַעָה וְרַבַּת בָּנִים אֲמַלְכָה: יְהוָה מִמִּית וּמַחְיָה מוֹרִיד שָׁאוֹל וַיַּעַל: יְהוָה מוֹרִישׁ וּמַעֲשִׂיר מִשְׁפִּיל אֶף־מְרוֹמִים: מְקִים מַעֲפָר דָּל מֵאֲשֻׁפֹת יָרִים אֲבִיוֹן לְהוֹשִׁיב עִם־נְדִיבִים וְכֹסֵא כְבוֹד יִנְחָלֵם כִּי לִיהוָה מִצְקֵי אֶרֶץ וַיִּשֶׁת עֲלֵיהֶם תִּבְל: רַגְלֵי חֲסִידָיו יִשְׁמֹר וְרָשָׁעִים בַּחֲשָׁד: יָדְמוּ כִי־לֹא בָכַח יִגְבֵּר־אִישׁ: יְהוָה יַחַתּוּ מְרִיבָיו עָלָיו בְּשָׂמִים יִרְעֵם יְהוָה יָדִין אֶפְסֵי־אֶרֶץ וַיִּתֵּן־עֹז לְמַלְכוֹ וַיִּרֵם קֶרֶן מְשִׁיחוֹ:

1. **And Hannah prayed**, and said, My heart rejoices in the Eternal One, my horn is exalted in the Eternal One; my mouth is enlarged over my enemies; because I rejoice in your salvation.
2. There is none holy as the Eternal One; for there is none beside You; nor is there any rock like our God.
3. Talk no more so very proudly; let not arrogance come out of your mouth; for the Eternal One is a God of knowledge, by whom actions are weighed.
4. The bows of the mighty men are broken, and those who stumbled are girded with strength.
5. Those who were full have hired out themselves for bread; and those who were hungry ceased to hunger; the barren has borne seven; and she who has many children has become wretched.
6. The Eternal One kills, and returns to life; [God] brings down to Sheol, and brings up.
7. The Eternal One makes poor, and makes rich; [God] brings low, and lifts up.
8. [God] raises up the poor from the dust, and lifts up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory; for the pillars of the earth are the Eternal One's, who has set the world upon them.
9. [God] will keep the feet of [God's] pious ones, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail.
10. The adversaries of the Eternal One shall be broken to pieces; from heaven shall he thunder upon them; the Eternal One shall judge the ends of the earth; giving strength to [God's] sovereign, and exalting the horn of [God's] anointed.

**From the Midrash Tanchuma (Rabbinic Writings) - compiled from earlier materials 5th Century CE**

Sometimes God is seen, and sometimes not.  
Sometimes God listens, and sometimes not.  
Sometimes God can be sought, and sometimes not.  
Sometimes God can be found and sometimes not.  
Sometimes God is near, and sometimes far.

## **Prayer means learning how to speak with God**

- *from a contemporary rabbi and scholar* **Rabbi David Wolpe**

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The Rabbis call prayer the service of the heart. The sacrificial metaphor (for "service" in the phrase above recalls the service and sacrifices of the Temple) is suggestive. Jewish prayer is built upon the idea that an offering is being made to God. Something is being given--the fervor and fullness of our souls. "One's prayer is not heeded," says the Talmud, "unless God is approached with one's heart in one's hands" (Taanit 8a).

Prayer is the complete act of the human spirit, touching all the faculties-- intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and even physical (in the prescribed motions of prayer). Such an offering is intended to be complete, the worshipers placing themselves on a metaphorical altar, putting themselves "on the line" in the hopes of acceptance.

### **Is God Listening?**

One difference between prayer and human communication is the assurance of God's acceptance, if not God's assent. The tradition accepts that God will embrace any prayer that is offered willingly and fervently.

This does not make prayer easy. For if the assurance of acceptance is one difference between human and Divine communication, the other difference is the uncertainty of response. We cannot know if anyone is listening. Is prayer truly a dialogue, or only a monologue? Any response in our lives to prayer is erratic at best. At times it is tempting to believe that something has been granted in answer to our request. In more sober moments we realize, however, that prayers do not appear to be answered in this world, that far too much is faithfully asked for and not given. If what we ask for is not granted, can we still maintain there is "response"?

Only inside can we feel if there is any reply. No activity in the world can conclusively demonstrate dialogue. Perhaps in the subjective chambers of the individual soul one may conclude that there was communication, but it is highly personal and ever uncertain. Everyone who prays struggles with the deep fear that this time, the only answer will be absence, silence.

The uncertainty of an answer is not the only obstacle to prayer. Even in more positive moments, when one is feeling the assurance of God's acceptance, to present oneself fully to God is extraordinarily difficult. We know the enormous resistance that wells up inside us when we seek to open ourselves to another human being. Fear rises like a wall in the soul and fights to keep us locked in and safe. That same wall rises when we seek to pray. At times it looms larger, since to open oneself to God entails greater surrender, even less certainty.

### **God's Compassion**

Nonetheless, the proclamation of God's compassionate acceptance is the sturdy undercurrent of Jewish prayer: "A broken and contrite heart, O Lord, You will not despise," cries the Psalmist (51:19).

In the course of Jewish history, endless meditations, exercises, detailed programs, and recitations have been developed for prayer, with many still in use, more long since discarded. They were never intended to reflect the emptiness of certain legislated phrases or the seemingly impressive recitation of long memorized prayers. Rather they have all been aimed ultimately at one state of mind: the worshiper should feel the impact of his or her action and should be willing to offer up a soul to God.

Maintaining fervor in any activity is a challenge. In prayer, when immediate rewards are often not apparent, it is particularly demanding. The discipline of regular prayer is difficult enough, with the pressing obligations of everyday wearing down resolve. Yet the true obstacle to prayer is not its regularity but its depth. In the Talmud we are told that God requires the heart (Sanhedrin 106b). To offer a heart in prayer is to open oneself, peeling off the rugged armor with which we shield our souls in a hostile world. It means abandoning our need for certainty in interaction: and allowing ourselves to be swept up in a dialogue as ancient as it is powerful. Learning, in short, how to speak with God.

### **Another Modern Perspective**

But, even if there is no God who is actually "listening," prayer still has tremendous relevance.... [When] we pray we appeal to the very best *within ourselves*. *Prayer is the process of the reintegration and existential recovery of self*, living as we do in a depersonalised, dehumanised and mechanistic society in which the self counts for very little. *Prayer is the experience of the mystery and the transcendental* in the world about us, the channel for the articulation of the awe and wonder of the ineffable in our day-to-day encounter with the Universe and with others. *Prayer is the recovery of the sense of life as poetry*, for all human articulation and expression of the divine is metaphor and symbol at best. *Prayer is the moral re-assessment and recommitment of the individual*, if you will "spiritual monologue" at its very highest.

Dr. Hillel E. Silverman, Introduction to *Service of the Heart* by Evelyn Garfiel