

You Might Consider Praying
Sara Sherbill, NY Times Guest Essay 11.1.24

This year keeps breaking our hearts; violence in Gaza and Israel; devastating floods and hurricanes. And those are just the headlines. Private lives seem no calmer. Certainly that was true for me. In 2024, my husband was hospitalized for weeks with a life-threatening illness, my best friend died, medical bills descended, and my marriage faltered. I lost any security upon which I had come to rely.

What can we do when our hearts are breaking? When we are filled with stress and anxiety, when the sadnesses stack up, when hopelessness isn't an irrational response but a genuine reflection of daily reality? What can we do when we don't know what to do?

We can pray.

Prayer requires no formal religious observance. You need not attend a temple or church or synagogue or mosque. Prayer need not be a poem or acrostic or hymn. Prayers can simply bubble up from the deepest place inside of yourself. It can be prayer in your own words. It can be prayer with no words. Many of us were raised to believe that prayer is about communicating with God. It can be, of course. But prayer can also be a way of communicating with ourselves, a tool of self-inquiry. It can be entirely our own, bespoke.

I was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. But, in the years after I left home, I slowly gave up observance, shedding the strictures about what to eat and what to wear and the prohibitions against the use of electricity on the Sabbath. Much of the practice I was raised with no longer serves me; prayer was the one thing I grabbed on my way out.

In childhood, the rigor and formality of prayer were simultaneously stifling and comforting. For me, the daughter of a rabbi, singing the same melodies every morning, every year, the words of prayer became inseparable from my own thoughts. In a terrible paradox, the highly structured, communal form of prayer I was raised with now reminds me of attending synagogue as a child, a place where a thin gloss of piety was used to cover up the abuse taking place in our home.

Fulfilling the obligation to recite the same set of prayers a set amount of times per day, every day, is a choice made by billions of people of various faiths all over the world. I often wonder if some of them feel as I once did — that being bound to prayer was both a blessing and a burden.

As a society, we have witnessed enough scandalous falls from grace by those who offer public prayer that many of us find prayer suspect, or false. As the years passed, I came to experience the words of the formal prayer service I grew up with as a poetic abstraction — beautiful but distant — when the assistance I needed were words that were urgent, immediate.

And yet, even if prayer as you once understood it isn't a place of solace, that doesn't mean it can't be once again. What if we redefine prayer entirely? What if, when you are home, you simply sit in a chair and breathe, imagining you are worthy of what you pray for? Maybe that's peace in your heart, or the strength to act with courage even when you are terrified. Maybe you are asking for the clarity of mind to know which path to take next.

Prayer can also be less a request than a thank you. It can be a list of everything you are grateful for. You might direct prayer toward those you have lost: In my case I think of my grandfather, or my best friend who died in April after a long battle with cancer. What if prayer is asking those who are gone to watch over us? Maybe your prayer is a walk in the morning that takes in the world around you, observing the light bouncing off the leaves. It seems to me that, too, is a prayer. Who is to say it is not?

You needn't abandon a God-focused relationship toward prayer. It might simply be altered. For me, sometimes prayer looks like this: I am driving and it is raining and the windshield wipers are going back and forth and I am crying and I am asking God for help. Help me Hashem, I whisper over and over. Just please help me. I use the Hebrew name for God because that is the name of God that I know.

Someone will hear your prayer, even if that someone is you.

In the children's book "Yussel's Prayer," Barbara Cohen retells a Jewish folk tale about a young orphan named Yussel who grew up in poverty and never learned to read. On the High Holy Days, he watches as the wealthy residents of his village attend synagogue in their finery. Unwelcome at synagogue because he cannot read, Yussel offers the only prayer he can, a simple tune on a reed pipe. During the concluding prayers of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the rabbi has a vision: The prayers of his congregants are not reaching the heavens. Their words are hollow, recited by rote while they are distracted by worldly concerns. It is only when a simple tune from a reed pipe plays that the gates are opened and the people's prayers flow though. It is Yussel's wordless prayer, offered from the heart, that opens the gates of heaven and lets the other prayers pass up to God.

Jewish tradition teaches that even when we cannot speak, God can hear what is in our hearts. Maybe this year we are all Yussel — alone out in the fields, with nothing but grazing cows and a homemade instrument. Maybe our prayer looks nothing like we thought it would. Maybe that's because our lives look nothing like what we thought they would. And maybe that's the point — we need to learn how to pray again so we can see ourselves anew.