

Spirituality, Prayer and Healing:

Building Strength Through Faith

Rabbi Naomi Levy

A community of faith can provide more than support when we are in need of help. The members of a faith community can strengthen our resolve to heal, can link their prayers to ours, and can restore us to faith. They can envelop us in caring and love.



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Why pray?

When I was a teenager, my girlfriends and I were often trying to diet. Our motto was: A moment on the lips is a lifetime on the hips. It meant that an act that took just an instant could remain with you forever. I like to apply this phrase to the process of prayer. A prayer takes just a matter of seconds to utter, but its influence in our lives, on our behaviour, on our hearts, on our perceptions, can be permanent. A moment on our lips is a lifetime on our souls. A simple prayer can change us; can lead us on the path to healing ourselves and our world.

So pray. Pray for peace, pray for healing, pray for advances in science, pray for the strength to eradicate poverty and disease, pray for the courage to overcome injustice, pray for resolve, pray for others, pray for yourself. Pray to God with all your heart and soul, then gather up your might to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Prayer is not a passive activity. Prayer alters us. It awakens us. Our eyes begin to notice beauty where we never noticed it before. Our hearts begin to feel compassion we never knew we had. Our priorities shift. As we talk to God, we receive the encouragement to live up to the potential inside us. Soon we start to see beyond ourselves into the world that is waiting for our help.

I believe God is listening. And I believe God answers us. God's answer to our prayers may be very different from the answer we were searching for. God's reply might come as the strength to fight on. It may come as the courage to face what we have been fearing. God's answer may be the ability to accept what we have been denying. Or it may appear as hope in the face of despair. God is neither distant nor deaf. We are not alone. God is present in our lives. When we stop bargaining with God and start opening up our souls to God, our prayers suddenly start working. We can pray for strength and receive strength. Prayer is ultimately an experience, not a request. It is a sense of being connected, of being part of something larger than ourselves. It is an attempt to be in the presence of God.

Praying in a community

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Praying with a community alters us. Often when life hurts we pray by ourselves and assume that we are alone in our pain. When we enter a community to pray our eyes open up. We see that we are not alone in our pain—there are others who suffer too. And we also realize that we are not alone in the world, there are dozens of people praying for us, extending their arms to help. Suddenly the nature of our prayers begins to change. We stop drowning in self-pity. We stop praying for ourselves alone. Before long we begin adding others to our prayers. We begin praying for our world. We begin to see our own troubles in a new light. Perhaps things aren't as bad as they seemed after all.

Mark was a man in my community who was depressed after heart surgery. He started losing weight and his doctors were concerned that he had given up on life. When I let some of my congregants know about Mark's condition they moved into action. They began taking him meals, visiting him at home, offering prayers and blessings. Even though he protested a bit, one woman started driving him to synagogue where he was

showered with blessings, prayers and song. Marks transformation was remarkable. Suddenly he started to thrive, eating his meals and laughing again. Sometimes a community's prayers can literally save a life.

Growing older

Only children look forward to getting older. The rest of us wish we could stop time. But we have no power over the aging process as it unfolds before us and upon us. We can spend a fortune on hair implants and plastic surgery, but these procedures can't make us even one day younger. What we do have, though, is the power to choose how we respond to our own aging. We can dread it, or we can embrace all the gifts that our years have to offer.

Growing older can certainly feel like a curse, especially in a society that idolizes youth. Aging inevitably brings with it a series of losses: the loss of employment and identity; the loss of control, of physical strength and health; the loss of friends; the loss of an illusion of invincibility. But aging also bestows a vast array of blessings upon us: the freedom of life without work, the joys of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the identity as the elder of a family, the perspective on life that can only be gained through years, the awareness of human frailty, the link to the past that elders can offer, the wisdom that comes with age.

We can get older against our will and become frightened frustrated, and angry, or we can grow older and reap all the benefits of age. Growing older means that we actively choose to continue to develop and live and learn and give and teach and help and bless this world.

A prayer for aging with dignity

I don't want to grow old God. I don't want any part of it. But since I have no power to stop the clock, my prayer is this: Let me age with grace.

Show me the way, God. Be with me. Grant health to my body and clarity to my mind. Give me strength. Help me to overcome my vanity. Teach me to combat self-pity. Don't allow me to become set in my ways. Shield me from isolation and from loneliness.

May the love of my family and friends be my reward for all the struggles of my youth.

Let all the blessings of age emanate from me. Let wisdom flow from my mouth, let compassion flow from my heart, let acts of kindness flow from my arms, let faith flow from my soul, let joy shine forth from my eyes.

Amen.

We are never too old to make birthday wishes

Two months ago, when I took my children to the library, I watched a small, pale grey-haired woman hunched and wrinkled with years patiently teaching a woman in her thirties how to read. When I returned with my children the following week, they were there again. The old woman pointed to each word and encouraged as the young woman slowly sounded out syllable after syllable, whispering in a timid, embarrassed voice.

Week after week I'd find them sitting there at a low table in the children's section, reading picture books amidst puppets and posters.

Last week when I came to the library, the two women were there working. But this time the young woman held her little boy on her lap. In a calm, confident voice she read to him from Goodnight Moon. He listened with rapt attention. The old woman looked on in delight. A mother's shame had turned to pride.

Every day we are given the opportunity to remake ourselves and to remake this world. No matter what our age we have the potential to grow and learn and change. No matter what our age, we have the potential to give and teach and enlighten.

Never stop making birthday wishes.

A birthday prayer for the power to grow

I am a year older today, God, and my birthday wish is this: Let me keep growing.

I want to grow, God, not only in years but in strength, in wisdom, in love. I want to gain patience, I want to gain compassion and understanding. This year, please help me to realize the potential You have placed inside me.

Thank You, God, for giving me precious life.

Amen.

Strength through faith: realising our dreams no matter what our age

We do have the power to recapture our longings and to realize them. It is never too late to do that. It was Goldie Shore who taught me this lesson.

Five years ago Goldie approached me after services. “Rabbi,” she said, “I’ll be eighty-four this year, and I want to have a bat mitzvah.” I said, “Of course, Goldie. But it’s not going to be easy. You’re going to have to study with me every week for a year.” She said, “This is something I’ve always wanted for myself. And besides, what do I have better to do?” The very next Tuesday, Goldie showed up in my study with a big shopping bag filled with papers, fruits and vegetables, a handkerchief, a sweater, a scarf, a Bible, two pairs of eyeglasses, another sweater in case it got chilly, and a tape recorder—not one of those small handheld models but a big, old, heavy one about the size of a large shoe box. I asked, “Goldie, how did you get here with such a heavy bag?” She answered, “With my feet. I walked.” Then she sat down and told me all about her childhood in Europe. How she wanted to learn Torah with her brothers but was not allowed. “It’s not for girls,” the rabbi told her. So she used to stand by the door and eavesdrop as her brothers studied. As a result, she picked up bits and pieces of Hebrew and prayers. One of her brothers became a Torah scholar, but when she tried to get him to teach her, he too refused, using the same refrain: “It’s not for girls.”

Week after week Goldie faithfully appeared at my door with her heavy shopping bag. The work was not simple. There was the Hebrew reading to master, as well as all the blessings and the melody of the haftarah. Not to mention the fact that Goldie had difficulty hearing. But she kept toiling away. One time it was cold and rainy outside, so I called her and said, “Maybe we should skip this week.” But the next thing I knew there she was at my door. She said, “I’ve waited eighty-four years to hear Torah from inside the door, and I’m not going to miss a class now.” Then Goldie added, “I want you to know that I take your tape with me to bed. It helps me to fall asleep when I have indigestion.” I told Goldie how well she was progressing, and she replied, “I know. I’ve got talent, don’t I?”

Goldie had more than talent, she had a real gift. She was one of my best students. It was as if she had known the material before, as if she had learned it once and now all she needed was to simply refresh her memory.

When the bat mitzvah day arrived, three of her children and four grandchildren flew in for the occasion. Goldie was beaming. At the appointed time, she slowly made her way up to the pulpit. Wrapped in a tallis, a prayer shawl, she opened the well-worn text she had studied from for a year, looked out upon the congregation with the mischievous smile of someone who is about to share a secret, and began to chant. Her chanting sounded like music from another world. It was as if all the women of her generation who had never been permitted to chant our prayers were rolled up into one voice. A voice that seemed to say, “I am here.”

A prayer for the strength to realise our dreams

You have blessed me with many gifts, God, but I know it is my task to realize them. May I never underestimate my potential, may I never lose hope. May I find the strength to strive for better, the courage to be different, the energy to give all that I have to offer.

Amen.

Prayer can transform our lives

When we wake up in the morning, we remember to prepare our bodies for the day ahead of us. We wash, we dress, we eat. Would you ever think of leaving the house without brushing your teeth? And yet we rarely take the time to prepare our souls for the day ahead of us. It doesn’t need to take very long. Just a minute or two each morning. But a simple morning prayer can literally transform the way we think, feel, behave, and work. A morning prayer helps to remind us how blessed we are—even on those days when you sleep through the alarm, when the coffee spills on your lap, when the toast burns, when the kids are whining, when nothing seems to be going right. Even brief prayer can give us the courage to confront a difficult day, and it can give us the insight to recognize a miraculous one.

Before you race out the door, take a moment. Take a deep breath in, let a deep breath out, and talk to God. Tell God your hopes for the new day and your worries too. And don’t forget to notice something to be thankful for this day.

A morning prayer

There are so many things I take for granted. May I not ignore them today.

Just for today, help me, God, to remember that my life is a gift, that my health is a blessing, that this new day is filled with awesome potential, that I have the capacity to bring something wholly new and unique and good into this world.

Just for today, help me, God, to remember to be kind and patient to the people who love me, and to those who work with me too. Teach me to see all the beauty that I so often ignore, and to listen to the silent longing of my own soul.

Just for today, help me, God, to remember You.

Let this be a good day, God, full of joy and love.

Amen.

A prayer for the body

Thank You, God, for the body You have given me. Most of the time I take my health for granted. I forget how fortunate I am to live without pain or disability, how blessed I am to be able to see and hear and walk and eat. I forget that this body of mine, with all its imperfections is a gift from You.

When I am critical of my appearance, remind me, God, that I am created in Your holy image. If I become jealous of someone else's appearance, teach me to treasure my unique form.

Help me, God, to care for my body. Teach me to refrain from any action that will bring harm to me. If I fall prey to a self-destructive habit, fill me with the strength to conquer my cravings.

Lead me to use my body wisely, God. Guide my every limb, God, to perform acts of compassion and kindness.

I thank You, God, for creating me as I am.

Amen.

Prayer at night can calm our fears and help us sleep through the night

We all know how to get our bodies ready for bed. We undress, put on pajamas, brush our teeth. But what about our souls? What do we do with our fears? Our longings? Our hurts? Our inspiration?

A prayer at night can help us embrace sleep instead of fighting it. It can help us to learn from darkness instead of fearing it. It can bring comfort to our minds and hearts. It can transform our worries into awe, our tension into trust, our restlessness into peace.

When you lie down in bed, spend a minute telling God what you need to say. May sweet sleep surround you all night long.

A night prayer

With the darkness comes Your light. Earth and sky blend into one, the heavens seem closer now, the day's burdens farther somehow. Your presence is almost palpable.

Watch over me, God, body and soul. Stay beside me through the night. Protect me from harm. Banish my fears. Send me dreams that are sweet, fill my heart with Your peace, set my mind at ease. And, at first light, please, restore me to new life.

Amen.

Prayer and faith can help us welcome God's healing power

It is natural to be frightened when we become ill. We feel vulnerable. We worry; we want to know that everything will turn out all right. We sometimes feel alone even when loved ones are by our side. The illness lies within us, and no one else knows exactly how we feel. Prayer has the power to transform our fear into faith. It reminds us that we are never alone. Everything we are, body and soul, is in the hand of God, whose presence fills the universe and who is as close to us as our own breath. No matter what this unpredictable world sends our way, with God by our side we can find the strength to confront our fears. So pray and welcome God's healing power.

A blessing for healing (for physical and spiritual healing that can be said with the laying on of hands)

*May God heal your body and soul. May your pain cease,
May your strength increase, May your fears be released,
May blessings, love, and joy surround you.
Amen.*

A prayer of thanks for healing

*I thought you had forgotten me, I felt abandoned and alone. I prayed to You, but You never answered. I searched, but I couldn't find You. And then, without warning, You spread Your love over me and taught me not to fear. You quieted me, You healed me, You blessed me, You stretch Your comfort over all living things.
Thank You, God, for giving me life and for saving my life.
Amen.*

Menopause: a sacred journey

We are comforted by God's predictable rhythms. The sound of our breath in and out, the beating of our hearts. The waves crash against the shore and recede, crash and recede. Day after day the sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes. But a woman's monthly cycle inevitably comes to an end. From the time we are young girls, we have owned this rhythm. It is a bittersweet blessing...

A prayer at menopause

Help me, God, to embrace life's cycle.

When my emotions fluctuate, steady me. When my body temperature rises, shade me beneath your cool, comforting shelter. When my spirit falls, lift me up, God; remind me that I am blessed, that I am beautiful, that I am desirable, that I am whole. When I find myself envying younger women, teach me, God, how to rejoice in the joy of others. Open my eyes to the abundant gifts that surround me each day.

I thank You, God, for making me a woman, for the beauty of youth, for the wisdom of my years.

I am comforted by Your predictable rhythms, God.

Amen.

Celebrating retirement

Retirement is a milestone we should consecrate. A valued colleague has reached the age of retirement after years of dedication, leadership, and creativity. A precious human being has left an indelible imprint on a workplace and on our society. Too often, we allow people to retire quietly without affording them the honor that is due them.

A retirement blessing

Thank you for your insight, your guidance, your companionship, your integrity, and for all the sacrifices you made.

May God bless the path you take.

May God bless your future labors with success.

May your newly found freedom bring you great pleasure and deep satisfaction.

May God bless your body with health and your soul with joy.

May your work here continue to flourish in your absence.

May you continue to spread your kindness and wisdom upon us for many years to come.

May God watch over you and shield you from harm.

May all your prayers be answered.

Amen.

Celebrating retirement: turning fear into fulfillment

Whenever we meet someone new, the first question we are inevitably asked is, What do you do? How are we supposed to respond when our years of employment have ended? What do we do? Many of us assume that our work is what brings us respect. Why should anyone care about us after we have lost our position of status? When we stop working, another fear surfaces. We suddenly discover that we don't know ourselves very well. As children we had interests and passions. But now we are not sure what brings us pleasure. Some

of us haven't spent time away from work in years. Even on vacation we were always working in our minds. We aren't sure we know how to enjoy anything anymore.

There is no doubt that retirement is a transition that conjures up many fears. But retirement can also lead to untold joy to unexpected freedom, to renewed vigor, and to a deeper and truer sense of self-worth.

A prayer at retirement: embracing a newly found freedom

I am scared God. Who am I without a title? Without a schedule? Without my job?

Teach me, God. Show me who I am. Remind me that I am not my job, nor was I ever so.

Open my eyes to the beauty that surrounds me. Open my heart to the love. Open my arms to family members and friends I was always too busy to embrace. Open my mind to the vast world of knowledge that lies before me. Open my ears to the cries of those who desperately need my assistance.

Fill me with compassion, God. Let me transform these doubts of mine into acts of goodness and charity. Calm my fears, God. Remind me that I am vital, that I am needed, that I matter, that I am loved.

Teach me to embrace this precious freedom I have been granted. For the first time in a long time I can choose to spend my days as I wish, to explore whatever I wish, to travel wherever I wish.

Help me live this time wisely, God. Lead me on the path to meaning, to satisfaction, to joy, to peace. Stay with me, God. Let me know You are near.

Amen.

Leaning on family and community: learning to reach out for help

When we are young, we place our trust in ourselves. But as we grow older our bodies betray us. Our memory mocks us. Our legs weary of carrying us. Our eyes play tricks on us. Our ears won't cooperate. Our hands refuse to obey us. Our stomachs rebel and our looks abandon us. We must learn how to depend upon others. We can laugh about it, but inside we are scared. We are scared of feeling useless. We don't want to become burdens to our children. For years we have taken care of them; now we might have to learn to let them take care of us.

A prayer for the strength to reach out for help

I don't want to be a burden, God. I certainly don't want pity. But I can no longer do it all alone.

Help me, God. Teach me not to be afraid to rely upon others. Show me how to accept kindness, how to ask for help. Teach me, God, that my children still love me even though they're grown.

I still have so much to offer, God. Help me find the ways to transmit my wisdom, to share my love, to realize my talents, to offer my reassurance and support.

Most of all, I place my trust in You, God; I place my body and soul in Your hands, and pray that You will be with me.

Amen.

A prayer for strength for a child who must care for an aging parent

It's so painful God to watch my mother begin to falter. I have always counted on her, and now she needs to count on me. I love my mother; I can't stand the way our roles have reversed. I don't want to see her in her weakness. I know this reversal is humiliating for her. She doesn't want to feel helpless or dependent. But she needs me now.

Help me, God, to rise to this critical occasion. Show me how to care for my mother with respect, tenderness, and love. Fill me with compassion and patience. Shield me from anger and resentment.

Calm my fears, give me strength, God. Help me to seek out relief and support when the burden is great.

Give her strength, God. Bless her with dignity, grace, and health.

Amen.

Special guest contributor, Rabbi Naomi Levy, created this article. Last modified: October 07.