

Author, Ben Birnbaum, once described growing up in an Orthodox Jewish community on the east side of New York City. Orthodox Jews are expected to pray three times a day. In his strand of Judaism there was a tradition of doing a shot of whiskey after the morning prayers in memory of the days listed martyrs.

This is how he described it. A handful of men would gather before dawn for the first prayers of the day. They included, Birnbaum, this 13-year-old boy among them. He describes how tradesmen, shopkeepers, and widowers would make their way, in the dark, to the corner of Hegeman and Sheffield streets. There they stood beside their gunmetal chairs below the buzzing of fluorescent lights. The moment the clock showed sunrise, and they could count 10 men (a minyan), they began.

Birnbaum describes how they'd hurry through the prescribed prayers as quickly as possible. Then they'd rush to the long table below the bookshelves at the back of the sanctuary. One of the men took a bottle of Seagram's from the secret arc behind a commentary on the Mishnah, while another brought a tray of shot glasses from the caterer's kitchen.

He writes, “Together we took into our bellies the first golden happiness of the day, crying out a *“L'Chayim”* – To Life! – in memory of some martyr they did not know. Then each man went off to business or breakfast, except for Mr. Auslander who stayed behind to wash the shot glasses. Birnbaum, who had to be in his eighth grade class and cold sober in an hour, would rush home to find his mom, in her frayed robe, serving oatmeal.

When I read that, years ago, I remember thinking that if that were my introduction to prayer, my prayer life probably would have looked a lot different over the years. As an 8th grader, I'd get up before dawn to pray with those guys, particularly since they moved quickly through the prayers.

How do you pray? After Jesus returned from praying, one of the disciples asked, “Teach us to pray. Teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.” Apparently, they recognized the importance of prayer. They felt a need to pray, but they weren't sure how to go about it.

I know from talking with so many of you, a lot of us are in that same boat. We know prayer is central to the religious life, but it's a struggle. Over the years, a number of people have said, "Pastor, I'm a doer not a prayer. Give me a project, but don't make me sit and pray." Prayer is a struggle. We question whether our prayer makes any difference at all.

I first went to Israel quite a few years ago. After arriving in Jerusalem, I was struck by the Muslim call to prayer. Muslims are expected to pray five times a day: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and at night.

I was not prepared for the fact that, no matter where I was in the city, at certain times of the day, I would hear the call to prayer being broadcast from these towers called minarets. It forced me to think about my own prayer. Could I discipline myself to pray five times a day? Is that even desirable? Is that kind of formal prayer even necessary?

I think it's interesting that the authors of both Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel included this episode in which a disciple asks Jesus to teach them how to pray. That's a request many of us might make, so I want to offer a few thoughts based on the way Jesus responded to that request.

Jesus said, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name." The first thing to recognize is that Jesus refers to God as father. I believe the significance of that is not that God is a father as opposed to a mother. The point is that God can be familiar and relatable. You have to recognize to whom it is you are praying.

There's an old story, some version of which I'm sure you've heard. A professor of the Old Testament goes to a church to lecture on Psalm 23. He reads the psalm: "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." The professor emphasized all the right words and used the proper inflection in his voice.

When he finished, he invited the matriarch of the congregation to come forward and recite the psalm. When she did it, she said it with such reverence and feeling, many in the audience were moved to tears. After the program, someone approached the professor and asked why the response was so different after she recited the psalm. He said, "That's easy. I know the psalm, but she knows the Shepherd." First, know who it is before whom you are praying.

Next, Jesus instructs his followers to pray “Your kingdom come.” I think this phrase is key, because, in it, there’s acknowledgment that things aren’t the way they should be. All is not right with the world. We don’t care for people the way we should. We don’t care for the earth the way we should.

One theologian describes prayer as “spiritual resistance to what is.” I like that description. When we pray for healing from cancer, either for ourselves or someone else, we are refusing to accept that cancer. It’s resistance. In prayer, we enlist God to assist in bringing about an outcome we desire for that person.

Praying for peace in the world, is resisting, on a spiritual level, violence and bloodshed and asking God to bring about something different. I know there are situations in which “thoughts and prayers” are not an adequate response, but real prayer is not a substitute for action. By voicing the desire for peace, we anchor our hopes on the divine possibility for change. We enlist God in the struggle for peace.

You might not consider yourself a praying person. You might not kneel at your bed every night and speak to God. You might not give thanks before every meal. You might not have a habit of formal prayer. But I would submit that if you are someone who longs for a better world, if you hold out hope for someone’s healing, if you can envision things differently than they are now, I consider you a praying person. The beginning of prayer is recognizing that things are not as they should be. God, your kingdom come!

Next, Jesus instructs his followers to ask for things. Have you ever noticed that when we say the Lord’s prayer every Sunday, the words we say are not polite and deferential? “Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins. Do not bring us to the time of trial.” These are demands. If you take nothing else away from this sermon, what I hope you will remember is that Jesus instructs his disciples to ask for what they want.

Of course, that doesn’t mean anything goes. You might say, “Pastor I’ve been praying for the new Infiniti QX 80 with a sunroof and tinted windows, but God has not answered my prayer.” Look at the first example Jesus provides. The prayer is not for a year’s supply of bread. The prayer is not for more bread than my neighbor has. The prayer is for enough bread for one day. It’s not about what we might want, but about what we need.

I know that one of the difficulties of prayer is the fact that we pray for things we don’t get. What good is prayer if there’s no response? I don’t have the definitive answer to

that question, but I believe our prayers have an effect on God. Therefore, our prayers make a difference.

Let me explain it this way. Recently, I sustained some damage to my car that I want to get fixed. It turned out I'm due for my regular scheduled maintenance. I spoke with someone at the service department at the dealership. He was explaining all the things I need done. He estimated it would take 2 to 2 ½ hours. Then, he asked, "Do you want to wait in our waiting area or do you want to drop off the car?"

If it were one hour or an hour and a half, I'd be fine with waiting. I could find stuff to do. With such a long wait, my preference was to drop off the car. I knew that some dealerships have loaners for folks who drop off their car. I didn't know if my dealership had that option, so I decided to ask.

The service representative told me they do have loaner cars, but they don't have one on the Wednesday I was scheduled to bring in my vehicle. "However," he said, "I do have a loaner car on Friday. I can switch your appointment." He couldn't give me exactly what I wanted, but when he heard my request, he was able to meet my need.

I believe prayer works in a similar way. When we ask for things, we might not get what we want, but that prayer has an effect on God. God hears our prayer. God cares about our prayer. God responds in some way we may never know. Don't think of prayer as begging God for things we want. Think of it as rousing God, rattling God's cage, encouraging God to get busy:

Your kingdom come!

Give us our daily bread!

Forgive us!

Do not lead us down the wrong road!

As Jesus told his disciples, "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

