

---

## Using Personal Prayer for Healing

*Carol Popky Hausman, Ph.D.*

“You may remember that at the first session it was I who voiced the concern that Judaism has not given me the personal comfort of prayer that I notice in my Christian friends. Well, Wednesday night I certainly felt a personal connection with the participants who read their prayers. Those prayers meant more to me than all the Kaddish, Sabbath, minyans, and shivas I have been through with the deaths of both my mother and father. I identified with them, I reread them, I called my sister and shared them with her. We reminisced, we cried, we philosophized, and we talked as we have never talked about religion and God before.”

*– E-mail message from member of a spiritual support group sponsored by the Washington Jewish Healing Network*

**T**en strangers hesitantly enter a room in a suburban synagogue. They don't know one another and they don't know what to expect. Each has suffered the loss of a parent, some recently, some many years ago. Without introductions, one of the leaders begins to sing a wordless melody. Even though the tune is familiar, almost no one joins in. Then the other leader says a prayer.

Next, a passage from the Torah about death is handed out and read. Eventually someone summons the courage to make a remark about what the passage means to him. Others respond, and as they do the stories of their individual losses emerge. By the end of the session, after a closing prayer, they are enthusiastically saying, “See you next week.” By the end of a few more weeks they know one another's stories, resonate to one another's losses, join the singing, anticipate the prayers. They have made

connections—within the group and with what Judaism has to say about their loss—and the process of healing has begun.

Spiritual support groups have developed in recent years to give people who are suffering from pain or loss an opportunity to access the tools of Jewish healing, in an effort to reach a place of peace and connect with their tradition, their community, and with God. The groups, which are generally led by a rabbi and a therapist, meet weekly for a limited number of weeks. During the sessions, we study, we sing, we become mindful of our blessings, we meditate, we talk, and we pray.

The Washington Jewish Healing Network, like many other healing centers across the country, offers spiritual support groups for bereaved parents, siblings, children, and spouses; for people who are ill and for their caregivers; for people estranged from their families; for healthcare professionals; for the elderly; for people experiencing infertility, and for others.

Healing of the body is usually called a cure. The kind of healing that occurs in a spiritual support group is independent of cure—it is a healing of the spirit, when illness or loss has disturbed one's sense of wholeness and one's connection with God and other people. What makes our groups Jewish is the content of the prayers, blessings, music, and texts used to stimulate discussion.

One of the major tools of Jewish healing is prayer. Prayer comes naturally at a time of illness or loss, because it helps us be hopeful. Sometimes we don't know what else to do, and so we pray. Like meditation, prayer can provide a place of inner peace where we can retreat from medical procedures and from the demands of the outer world. It connects us to our tradition as we recite the words that millions of Jews have spoken as they searched for healing. The question of whether anyone is listening to the prayer is a personal one. Many of us are sure that there is. But even without that conviction, subjective benefits may come from prayer—a sense of hopefulness and connection to community. Rabbi David Wolpe writes:

That we are heard is the central conviction of prayer. Prayer does not rise or fall upon the granting of a wish. That is the prayer of a child who views heaven as a celestial dispensary of gifts. As often as not our requests are denied... The Psalmist loves to know that God listens to his prayer, not

grants his prayer. But we are granted the object of prayer itself, and that is to be heard... True prayer is liberation. It releases the imaginings and yearnings of a soul, relieves—even if only for a moment—the fear of being alone, of never being understood.<sup>1</sup>

In our spiritual support groups, the rabbi with whom I lead the groups and I include prayer in every session. After a calming *niggun* (a wordless melody) we start with a prayer, sometimes from the liturgy, sometimes from a modern Jewish writer, sometimes composed by one of us. At the end of each session, we say a *mi-sheberakh*, a prayer for healing. Sometimes the words of our *mi-sheberakh* come from the liturgy and sometimes they are composed on the spot and relate to the topic of that evening's discussion. The *mi-sheberakh* always includes a plea to God to heal the spirit of the members of the group.

Recently I've come to realize how much comfort I have found in composing my own prayers. In *Entering Jewish Prayer*, Rabbi Reuven Hammer reminds us about the value of combining something from our tradition and something from our hearts in our own prayers. Hammer says:

Prayer should always be a combination of set words and spontaneous expression. We utilize the magnificent texts that others have written and we add to them through variations and interpretations and whatever words we wish to add in order to bring our feelings to the fore.<sup>2</sup>

We have begun to include the composing of prayers as a vital part of every group, using as our text one or more of the following: a list of the uses of prayer composed by Rabbi Amy Eilberg; a passage from Reuven Hammer's book; excerpts from the section on prayer in Wolpe's *The Healer of Shattered Hearts*; or one of the many beautiful poems about prayer used in healing services across the country. In one group our text was a recorded interpretation of *Al Tatzir* by Debbie Friedman. Whatever the text, it stimulates people to talk about when and how they pray and what they pray for. They talk about times when their prayers have been answered, and times when they felt God's face was turned from them.

After the discussion on prayer, we assign homework—the only time we dare do that in these groups! We ask the group members to think of

1 David Wolpe, *Healer of Shattered Hearts*, New York: Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 102-3.

2 Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*, New York: Schocken Books, 1994, p. 12.

what they need from God to find comfort—from their loss, their illness, their estrangement, their fears. We then ask them to write a prayer for the final session and, if they are willing, to bring copies for everyone in the group. During the last session many people read their prayers aloud and others respond to them. “You expressed exactly how I feel,” and “It sounds as though you were talking about my child,” are common reactions. In a group for people who had lost a parent, five of the nine participants brought prayers to share. Following are some examples.

Cynthia’s prayer had two sections. The first had to do with what she wanted to remember, the second had parallel requests that God let her honor her mother for the qualities she remembered:

Let me remember her loving consolation when as a child I was sick, and her jars of soup when I became an adult...Let me honor my mother by assistance to the sick, with comfort and food...Let me remember her generosity and hospitality, her willingness to include at our holiday table those without their own family close by... Let me honor my mother by keeping in touch with my extended family and keeping closer with my sister.

Cynthia ended with: “Dear God, Let my mother live on in my memories and let her spirit live on through my life and through those who come after.”

Rachel’s prayer was a letter to her father, expressing what she longed for, and what she thought he would have been like in his old age, even though he was no longer alive. She wrote:

Please dance at my wedding, dance every dance, kvell with pride over your grandchild, tell the whole world, pass out cigars...Tell jokes in Yiddish (or just the punch lines!), move into my house, play your stereo at all hours...drive a big old car below the speed limit...[and] tell me over and over about the first time you held me in your arms.

Rachel’s prayer ended by asking God to bless her father and asking for comfort and for acceptance of her limitations in understanding. Her final lines were: “Let the gift you gave me that was my father be alive in my heart always. Let your blessings continue to rain down upon me!”

A young bereaved man whose father had died very recently included thoughts of his mother:

I pray that you give my mother strength and peace. I thank you for blessing me with a father who was kind, loving, funny and warm. I pray that I will always remember my father as he was when he was living.

At an earlier session of this particular group, we had had a discussion of Jewish views of the afterlife, stimulated by reading the story of King David’s loss of his infant son, particularly the line, “I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me.” (11 Samuel 23) Remembering that discussion, one woman’s prayer included:

May the one who blessed our ancestors hear my prayer. I pray that my Mother has found her way to a peaceful place. I pray that in this timeless place where her soul finds her home she feels my love for her...I pray that she knows that the lessons she has taught me inspire my thoughts and guide my decisions and I pray I can give her blessings to my daughters. I pray that in that place, in that world for which we have no words, my Mother waits for me so that I can yet again thank her for her gifts to me. I pray for my Mother, already without words.

Sarah’s prayer began by thanking God for answering her request that her father not suffer at the end of his days:

I felt your presence in the comforting thoughts that Dad was at peace...that he died as he had wanted and was being buried as he wanted...For Your presence and for my experience of the gifts of strength, courage and peace, I thank You.

As Sarah’s prayer went on, though, she asked where God had been since then, telling God how alone and abandoned she felt:

I pray for you to show Yourself to me again...And I pray to feel less alone with my sorrow...I pray to see the brightness and feel the warmth of Your presence once again.

Sally was one of the people in the group whose mother had died several years ago. She wrote:

May I remember...That the loss is profound and defining. That death is inevitable. That, without death, we would strive for less in life. That what seems unbearable can be borne, will be borne, is borne, only to seem unbearable again. That she whom I lost exemplified many ideals. That she whom I lost was human, after all. That life is a privilege, each day is to be valued and evaluated. That I have so much for which to be thankful. That I want to touch others, as did she. That death is a common denominator... May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Adonai, my Rock and my Redeemer.

In a healing group for Jewish men and women experiencing infertility or pregnancy loss, five couples met for a series of sessions. Despite their different experiences—two had children, several had had miscarriages, others were unable to conceive—their empathy for one another was profoundly moving.

When the time came in the group to compose prayers, one young woman whose late pregnancy had to be terminated for medical reasons, and who was in the throes of procedures to help her have a child, wrote:

If a prayer is a wish, then I wish I'd never heard of isodicentric marker chromosomes. I wish I knew how to stop wanting something so much that I forget everything else.

If a prayer is a petition then I ask for patience. I ask to be reminded of the happiness that I have already. And I ask for the ability to reach out to others, especially when they can't reach out to me.

If prayer is an exaltation, then I extol the morning sun and the evening rain.

I praise the force that connects parent to child and the past to the future. And I celebrate the love in my life.

A woman who had a particularly difficult miscarriage presented the following prayer:

There are clouds on the ceiling of the room we now use as our office—painted by the previous owners.

**If a prayer is a wish,  
then I wish I'd never  
heard of isodicentric  
marker chromosomes**

A subtle reminder to me that we are still not using that room for its intended purpose.

I look forward to the day that we do...

I want the sadness to be over.

I want tears of joy, a calmness, a serenity.

I want to hear Gary's beautiful voice sing our baby to sleep.

Is that too much to ask for?

I want the exhaustion of not knowing to end.

I want to be awakened by the crying of a hungry baby, rather than by my own tears.

I want to look at those clouds on the ceiling and smile.

I don't think this is too much to ask.

Her husband, Gary, also brought a piece that began this way:

I don't believe in prayer

Because I don't believe that an

omnipotent power has the power to answer those prayers.

I do believe in hope

Because without hope I'm not sure there would be anything to live for...

I hope for the day when I no longer see my wife in pain,

When she can again take pleasure in life.

I hope for the day when I don't feel the need to walk away from colleagues talking about their children.

Or feel that my friends won't talk to me about their children because we are childless...

Lastly, there was one couple who were in the process of arranging adoption, and that young man's prayer read:

*Avinu she-ba-shamayim*, our Father who is in heaven,

At Sinai Moses received the Torah and handed it over to Joshua,

Who handed it over to the elders,

Who handed it over to the prophets,

Who handed it over to the men of the Great Assembly,

Who passed it down to us.  
Let us not be the break in that chain of tradition.  
Abraham had Isaac to re-dig his wells so that the water  
continued to flow.  
Rebecca drew water from the well of loving-kindness so that she could  
join with Isaac.  
Together they used these waters to water the seed that would  
become Israel.

May we be blessed with children  
So that we may draw from these same waters  
And give them to these children  
So that they may drink deeply from the traditions  
And grow into strong shoots from the branches of Israel,  
Your treasured people in whose praise You dwell.

*Barukh atah Adonai, eloheinu melekh ha-olam, moshivi akeret  
ha-bayit, em ha-banim smeichah.*

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who  
transforms a barren woman into a happy mother of children.



*Dr. Carol Hausman is a clinical psychologist and gerontologist. She is a founder and coordinator of the Washington Jewish Healing Network and serves on the faculties of the Washington School of Psychiatry and the Georgetown University School of Medicine.*