

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS

Hearing God

by [Rabbi Irwin Katsof](#)



Prayer is a two-way street, speaking as well as listening.

A student of mine named Ronnie was found to have a tumor behind her eye, which had to be removed surgically. Although the tumor was benign, the needed operation was to be quite complicated due to the tumor's proximity to the brain, requiring two surgeons -- an eye specialist and a neurologist -- working together.

In addition to the risk of brain damage, permanent blindness was also a possibility.

Ronnie was terrified by what awaited her and found herself emotionally paralyzed and unable to pray. A close friend seeing her terror brought a book, *My Father, My King*, written by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin. Using the Torah as his guide, Rabbi Pliskin wrote the book in the form of a hundred short messages from God, each one answering a different situational dilemma.

Ronnie opened the book quite randomly and found herself reading:

"When you experience fear, hear your Father, your King, the Creator and Sustainer of the entire Universe, saying to you: 'My child, let Me help you over your fears ... I am always with you...'"

A MESSAGE OF REASSURANCE

It was precisely what Ronnie needed to hear. She started to cry as the gentle words of love and reassurance swept over her. The remarkable thing is that then she flipped the page again, and her eyes fell on the following story:

"Rabbi Lederberg who lived in Jerusalem, ran a business to earn a living and spent all the time that remained studying the Torah. Once he became sick and needed surgery to his head. The doctors told him that after the operation, which was needed to save his life, he might never see again..."

Ronnie gasped. This is what was happening to her.

The story went on to relate that the rabbi's surgery was a success and not only did it save his life, but it saved his vision as well.

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What Ronnie read gave her the strength she needed to face her operation and the lengthy recuperation after. She really felt God was with her, sending her His love in the messages from the book.

Today, she reports using Rabbi Pliskin's book quite often, flipping to a random page and finding there a message from God that fits the moment perfectly.

THE VOICE OF SINAI

We all want a connection with God when we are troubled and having a hard time finding answers to difficult questions.

The Sages advise us that the best way to hear God is by reading and studying the Torah.

In the Book of Exodus, the Torah tells us that God spoke to the Israelite nation at Mount Sinai and in a simple, clear way spelled out how we human beings could forge a relationship with Him and how we could have our prayers answered.

God's voice from Sinai has never ceased. It resonates today and the easiest way to tune into it is by studying God's word in the Torah. It will teach you what this relationship between us and God is all about and why it is so important to our lives.

WHAT THE TORAH TEACHES

One of the most poignant stories of the Torah tells us about Abraham, the first monotheist, and his relationship with God.

As the story opens, Abraham, who just a day earlier made his covenant with God, is praying. The Torah relates:

God appeared to him in the plains of Mamrei, as he was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw and there were three men coming up toward him. He saw them and ran from the tent to greet them...

Incredible. God had appeared to Abraham and they were having a personal conversation. As hard as we might pray to get close to God, it's highly unlikely we will ever get that close. Yet, Abraham *interrupted* his prayer to greet some strangers. He said, "Sorry God, there's somebody at the door. See you later." Why?

In this very clear message the Torah is telling us that acting with kindness toward others – acting *like* God – is more important than talking to God.

It is more important to help others than to enjoy a spiritual high alone.

A MESSAGE FROM GOD

A friend of mine named Uriela decided to take a trip into the Sinai Peninsula, secretly hoping for a spiritual experience. This was the place, she knew, where the Israelites had their profound encounter with God, which changed them – and indeed, the world – forever. Some of those spiritual vibrations were bound to be hanging around; she wanted to see if she could tune in.

The goal of the trip was to reach the highest spot in the Sinai open to tourists – Mount Abbas Basha – and see the sunset from there. It took three hours by Bedouin cab, three hours by camel and another two hours walking.

She found herself in stunning territory, surrounded by mammoth, wind-shorn rocks reaching like tall arms to the sky. Here was land where nothing grew, not even a blade of grass, and no birds or any other sign of life interrupted the forbidding vistas. It was awesome.

But, as Uriela and her guide rested prior to taking on the last climb just before sunset, the stillness was broken by voices and three hikers appeared from nowhere.

Uriela was very surprised to see other people amid such isolation, but she became annoyed when the hikers decided to take a rest next to her little encampment. "Can't they find another place to sit?" she muttered to her guide. "They've got the whole Sinai? Why do they choose to impinge on my space?"

AND THEN IT HIT HER. IT WASN'T HER SPACE; IT WAS GOD'S SPACE.

And then it hit her. It wasn't her space; it was God's space. And how different was her attitude toward these three strangers than Abraham's had been toward his three visitors. She did an immediate 180-degree spin and offered the hikers some of her food.

"No thank you," they said, and promptly left.

Uriela is convinced today that they were sent there for this very purpose. She had prayed for a spiritual experience and her prayers were answered -- although not in the way she had imagined.

That trip to the Sinai proved to be a redefining experience for Uriela. Henceforth, she made it a point of being hospitable and would frequently have large groups to dinner, among whom many "strangers" were present.

And it led to other, significant changes in her life. She always thought of herself as a good person, but the process of self-examination that began in the Sinai led her to realize that she was not a "good" person -- she was merely "not bad."

She never hurt people and was generally nice. But putting herself out for strangers -- doing something actively good -- was not part of her life plan. All this changed for her dramatically, and she says she never ceases to be grateful to God for that.

The important factor in Uriela's story is that she would never have heard the message if she had not been familiar with the Abraham story. The message would have come -- the strangers would have arrived, sat down, annoyed her -- but she wouldn't have known what to make of it.

It would have been rather like a radio broadcast in a foreign language, with idiomatic references she could not decode.

And this is why, of course, the Sages advise that to hear God one must study the Torah. Then when you do tune in to God's message, you can understand it.

Then you can grasp the big picture and how all the little pieces fit together to make of you the best that you can be.