

Thoughts and Prayers, Hands and Hearts
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Mother Teresa wasn't Jewish, but I consider some of her teachings to be Torah for our time. She said, "Give your hands to serve and your hearts to love."

This focus on the hands and heart should guide us like a beam of light on the darkest night.

Though the spring sun shines outside, the last few weeks have been clouded by an unusually high number of public tragedies around the world and closer to home. We all react differently to them as individuals. But what is the Jewish response?

A common response to tragedies is "thoughts and prayers." I know this expression carries different connotations, some of which are loaded. "Thoughts and prayers" is a common refrain from some public officials in the aftermath of tragedy. Some people criticize the expression's repeated use in the context of terrorism and gun violence. I acknowledge that reaction, and I put all that over here (use hands). At Kiddush we can have this important *political* discussion.

Right now, however, I want to go in another direction. Today I want to explore this idea of "thoughts and prayers" from a *religious* perspective. I am a rabbi, after all!

In short, the Jewish response to challenge and tragedy is to do all we can with our hands and our hearts.

Thoughts and prayers alone aren't nearly enough. Words without action are mere lip service, literally. I think we all intuit this human truth from a young age. What may be surprising is that this is a *religious* truth too. Our Torah teaches that even G-d disapproves of prayers when action is called for.

Consider this puzzling verse in the Torah. Immediately before the Red Sea splits, the Israelites stand trapped between the watery Red Sea and the vengeful Egyptian army. Petrified, they call out to Moses. Their unflappable leader reassures them, "Don't worry, G-d will save us." Then G-d says something unexpected: "Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the Israelites and have them travel" (Ex. 14:15). You heard that right: G-d basically tells Moses, "Don't look at Me. You guys do something about it." Why might G-d respond this way?

Rashi writes that at this chaotic moment, Moses was standing in prayer. G-d then rebuked Moses, "This is not the time to go on and on with your prayers! The people Israel is in trouble!"

The takeaway for us is that there are moments when it's not appropriate to ask for G-d's help. The *religious* response is to put down the Siddur, as it were, and *do* something. The hand precedes the heart.

What does this look like today? In the event of a global natural disaster, like the devastating cyclone in Mozambique last month, our hands should open our wallets to give Tzedakah.

Next, affected communities must take preemptive efforts to minimize damage in the event of future disasters. Meanwhile, on the individual level, in the case of a personal injury or illness we should seek out a doctor and follow their instructions to the last word. Does anybody here know a good doctor?

But sometimes our hands do all they can and it's still not enough. What then? This is where thoughts and prayers come in.

Thoughts and prayers do a world of good as they generate good in the world.

Before we consider what prayer *is*, here is what it's *not*: Prayer is not a vending machine where coins and snacks are replaced by our words and wishes granted. If that were the case, *we* would be the powerful ones, not G-d. For *we* would be in control of what G-d does and doesn't do.

Here is what prayer *does*: Prayer is a 3D experience. It impacts the three dimensions of G-d, community, and individual.

The first dimension is G-d. Tefillah moves G-d to act on behalf of someone in certain situations. While I can't prove that, I *can* say with certainty that is what our Jewish tradition teaches. I *can* say this describes my own life experience. There have been moments in my life when I prayed that somebody ill recover from illness, that someone having trouble conceiving have a baby, that somebody vulnerable be OK. And they were. I really believe G-d was part of these successes and that my prayers and others' made a difference. At the same time, there have been other moments when my prayers were not answered. Why does G-d seem to answer some prayers but not others? That's another tough-but-important question for another day. Only one sermon at a time, people!

Prayer's second dimension is community. Prayer changes us as a group. Tefillah brings us *physically* together. That's what the Hebrew word for shul, *Beit Knesset*, means, place of assembly. Look around and ask yourselves, Where was the last time you saw these people? I bet for most of us, the answer is here, at shul. *This* is where we gather to mark holidays together, to celebrate life's highs together, and to find support to endure life's lows together. When we sing together - as we just did - we feel *emotionally* connected to this group. Prayer connects us to people across the world too, some of whom are suffering. Don't forget that the language of the Siddur on every page is "we." *We* before *me*.

And Tefillah's third dimension is the individual. Prayer changes you and me. The passages that speak of G-d's amazing world remind me that the universe does not revolve around *me*, but instead that I am a small part of G-d's much larger world. Next, focused prayer helps me zoom out. For these minutes I think less about what I want right now, and more about what is of ultimate importance, what transcends me. Prayers remind me of what an ideal world looks like. Prayer connects my heart to my hand by motivating me to act when people need help.

And it's not just me. A study published two years ago found that "people who are religiously affiliated are more likely to make a charitable donation of any kind, whether to a religious congregation or to another type of charitable organization."

So prayer holds together the three dimensions of G-d, community, and the individual, sort of like a Rubik's Cube.

Let's look at how prayer is part of our Jewish response to serious, faith-testing challenges. I believe that in such a situation, we the People Israel should follow the footsteps of our Patriarch Israel. Our ancestor Jacob faced an existential crisis. After building a family up north, he returns to Canaan where he learns that his brother Esau - who last we heard wants him dead - is marching toward him with an army of 400 men. Terrified for his life, how does Jacob respond?

He does three things in Genesis Parshat Vayishlach. First, he divides his family and animals into two groups, thinking if one is attacked the other will be spared. Second, he later sends lavish gifts to Esau in order to appease his brother. These two practical steps mark all Jacob can do with his *hands*.

But Jacob doesn't stop there. Third, he prays to G-d. I paraphrase: "G-d of my fathers, You have been endlessly kind to me. Please save me from this danger. Please remember the promise You made to keep me and my family well." This prayer marks all Jacob can do with the *heart*.

The takeaway for us is that Jacob responds to challenge with *both* the hands and the heart. And so should we. On the individual level, we should follow our doctors' instructions AND say a *Misheberach* prayer that they recover. While on the global level, we should donate to disaster relief AND pray for the victims' recovery.

About two weeks ago, an Israeli humanitarian NGO called IsraAID sent an emergency response team to Mozambique to assist in the fallout of the calamitous cyclone. Israel frequently sends a response team to areas hit by natural disasters because helping out is a Jewish reflex.

There's an amazing documentary called "To Life: How Israeli Volunteers are Changing the World." We screened this at Beth El in the fall. In it, we meet a team of Israeli medics dispatched to Nepal in the aftermath of the 2015 crushing earthquake. One medic describes what motivates him as a religious Jew to join. Dr. Giora Weiser says, "I'm standing here not just as Giora, but I stand here as a Jew who believes in G-d, and I believe that G-d wants me here. He wants me to help these people because they need help. I think it's not only our privilege but our duty."

Whatever challenge we face, *this* is our roadmap: hands and heart.

Shabbat Shalom.