

# “Hey God, Could You Do Me a Favor?”

The What, Why, and How of Asking  
God for Help

## Study Session

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains background materials and a facilitator guide. These will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

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“Hey God, Could You Do Me a Favor?”

## Facilitator Guide

### Overview and Objective

For many of us, it is easiest to talk to God when we need a favor. Sometimes we ask for large, global favors like when we pray for an end to war and bloodshed or a cure for AIDS. Other times, we ask God to help those we know individually, like when we say a special *mishebeirakh* prayer during the Torah service to ask God to heal our sick friends and relatives. And, of course, we even throw in our own personal requests, asking God for the perfect summer job, a good grade on a test, or even the attention of a potential significant other.

Although it may be easy to ask God for favors, it is harder to know if God has heard us and/or plans to respond to our requests. This study packet seeks to address this theological issue as well as a number of other questions raised by asking God for help.

The study guide is composed of three sections:

- The first section, entitled “Jewish Tradition and Asking God for Favors,” explores whether our religion encourages or discourages asking God for help.
- The second section, entitled “If You Ask Nicely...,” explores how one might go about making requests of God.
- The third section is entitled “Is God Listening?” and explores whether our prayers affect God’s actions.

As you can imagine, all the sections provide multiple opinions and answers to the various questions. The goal of this study packet is to offer a framework in which you can explore, evaluate, and react to the different topics and views presented.

Although this material is presented as a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end. Each section can stand on its own or be combined with another section or additional texts. You may want to use one of the texts as a basis for a *d’var torah*.

Alternatively, you can place one of the texts on the center of your Shabbat dinner table and use it to spark an informal discussion. Be creative with the material and have fun!

## Definitions and Biographies

**Beliefnet.com-** A cool website with many theological resources.

**Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits-** Orthodox Rabbi who lived from 1908-1992. Served as a Rabbi and scholar in Germany, England, Australia, and the United States. His books include A Jewish Critique of the Philosophy of Martin Buber (1962) and Faith After the Holocaust (1973).

**Rabbi David Wolpe-** Conservative Rabbi at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and author.

**Rabbi Leon of Modena-** Rabbi, poet, and scholar from Italy who lived from 1571-1648.

**Rabbi Nachman of Breslov-** Hassidic Rabbi (Rebbe) who lived from 1772-1810. Known for his moralistic stories and his kabbalistic and meditative practices. His followers never appointed a new Rebbe after his death. Even today, modern Breslover Chassidim still view Rabbi Nachman as their leader.

## Section One– Jewish Tradition and Asking God for Favors

### Texts:

מסכת יבמות דף סד:א<sup>1</sup>

א"ר יצחק מפני מה היו אבותינו עקורים מפני שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים.

*Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot 64a*

Rabbi Yitzhak stated: Why were our ancestors (the patriarchs and matriarchs) barren? Because God desires the prayer of the righteous.

מסכת בבא מציעא דף נט:א

א"ר אלעזר מיום שנחרב בית המקדש ננעלו שערי תפלה שנאמר גם כי אזעק ואשוע שתם תפלתי ואע"פ ששערי תפלה ננעלו שערי דמעות לא ננעלו שנאמר שמעה תפלתי ה' ושועתי האזינה אל דמעתי אל תחרש.

*Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Metzia 59a*

Rabbi Eleazar said: Since the destruction of the Temple, the gates of prayer are locked, for it is written, "Even when I cry and call [for help], He shuts out my prayer." Yet although the gates of prayer are locked, the gates of tears are not, for it is written, "Hear my prayer, God, and give ear unto my cry; to my tears, do not be silent."

*Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, "The Dangers of Personal Prayer"*

It is easy to acknowledge the religious importance of the spontaneity of free personal prayer. It is unparalleled in intensity of emotion and sincerity of devotion. Yet, such immediate and free praying, brought on by specific occasions, has its pitfalls and shortcomings. In the case of supplications, this is quite obvious. That a human being, in a situation of crisis, should seek the nearness of God is understandable enough. That he should seek it only in such a situation is also understandable, but not necessarily right in the context of a broader God-oriented interpretation of human existence. To seek God only in a time of trouble implies that one needs Him only when in trouble. The free outpouring of the heart may indeed be felt very deeply but, however genuine, it is a crisis prayer. God, however, is not just a crisis God....

In the spontaneous, crisis prayer, the need of the moment brings us before God. It is the cry that justifies the request...Those who remember God only in their troubles are concerned only with themselves...

The self-centeredness of such prayer may amount to outright selfishness and may lead to unethical praying. It is not at all contrary to the dignity of God that man should pray to Him for a piece of bread, but it is unethical prayer if he prays for something that can only be had to the detriment of others.

<sup>1</sup> Texts in this section are taken from the study packet "Approaches to Prayer" compiled by Rabbi Aryeh Ben David, The Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies.

## Discussion Questions:

1. Before reading the excerpts in this section, ask the following questions:
  - a. What type of requests do you make of God?
  - b. When do you ask God for these favors (during services or times of set prayer, before you go to sleep, or whenever you need something)?
  - c. Is asking God for help the main purpose of prayer? What are some other purposes?
2. Read the text from *Yevamot*. (If you would like, talk about how the patriarchs and matriarchs in *Bereshit* all had trouble conceiving children and how they turned to God for help. For the most straightforward example, see *Bereshit* 25:21.) Discuss the passage's view of asking God for favors. Do you believe that God responds to requests from the righteous differently than from other people?
3. Consider the excerpt from *Bava Metzia*. Ask students what they picture the "Gates of Prayer" and the "Gates of Tears" to be? For example, are they physical locations or metaphors? Why would God shut out prayers but respond to crying? Is one more genuine than the other?
4. Read the excerpt from Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits. Why does he feel that individual requests to God are positive and necessary? Why does he also feel that asking God for help is problematic? Ask students if they agree with Rabbi Berkovits' reasoning.

(You may find that students enjoy breaking into *hevrotot* [study pairs] to read the texts and then have smaller, more intense discussions.)

## Section Two – If You Ask Nicely....

### Texts:

מסכת ברכות דף לד:א

אמר רב יהודה לעולם אל ישאל אדם צרכיו לא בשלש ראשונות ולא בשלש אחרונות  
אלא באמצעיות דא"ר חנינא ראשונות דומה לעבד שמסדר שבח לפני רבו אמצעיות  
דומה לעבד שמבקש פרס מרבו אחרונות דומה לעבד שקבל פרס מרבו ונפטר והולך לו.

### *Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 34a*

Rav Yehudah said: One should never request his needs in the first three blessings [of the Amidah] or in the last three blessings, but only in the middle ones, for Rabbi Hanina said: The first [section] is similar to a servant who organizes the praise of his master; the middle is similar to a servant requesting payment from his master; the last is similar to a servant who has received payment from his master and takes his leave.

### *Excerpted from "Likutey Eitzot," the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov.*

When you speak to God, make it a habit to express the longing and yearning you feel to extricate yourself from evil and attain true good. It is by praying and pleading like this that you draw your spiritual power and strength from the realm of the potential and possible to the realm of the real and actual. The longing and yearning by themselves create only the possibility of spiritual strength. But the words of your prayers and conversations with God draw this spiritual strength into the realm of the actual: it becomes realized in actual fact...

How good it is to pray to God and meditate in the meadows amidst the grass and the trees. When a man goes out to the meadows to pray, every blade of grass, every plant and flower enter his prayer and help him, putting strength and force into his words...

Everybody should set aside fixed periods every day and express himself before God in his own native language. You should set forth whatever is in your heart. Use every kind of appeal and argument. Use words that will endear you to God and win His favor. Plead with Him to draw you closer...

It is true that weeping and crying are good when you plead and entreat before God...

### Discussion Questions:

1. Before reading the texts, ask the following questions:
  - a. Do you believe there is a certain way to make requests of God or ask God for help? If so, what is the method that you use?
  - b. How does the method you use to ask God for help differ from the method you use to ask people for help? If there is a difference, why do you believe it is there?
2. Read the passage from *Brakhot* with your students. Not only does this excerpt talk about the process of making requests of God, but it also helps explain the structure of the *Amidah*. Explain that the weekday *Amidah* is comprised of nineteen separate blessings. (If you think it will be helpful, open a prayer book and point out some of these blessings). Explain that it is possible to divide the structure of the *Amidah* into three sections, as Rav Yehudah and Rabbi Hanina do in this passage. The first three blessings are blessings of praise. The next thirteen blessings are blessings of petition or request. The last three blessings are blessings of thanksgiving. After reviewing this, ask students for their opinions on Rav Yehudah's and Rabbi Hanina's strategy for asking God for favors.
3. Rav Yehudah and Rabbi Hanina both advocate making requests from God in an organized and deliberate manner. On the other hand, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov encourages spontaneous prayer and entreaties. Ask students to discuss why the texts might take such different approaches to asking God for help. Do they believe that God responds more favorably to fixed prayer than spontaneous prayer or vice versa? Or, might the different methods of asking God for help have more to do with the needs of the person praying to God than with what God wants to hear?
4. Discuss the benefits of and problems with both the fixed and the spontaneous methods of asking God for help. Which method resonates more strongly with students and why?

## Section Three – How Do I Know That God is Listening?

### Texts:

מסכת יבמות דף סד:א

א"ר יצחק למה נמשלה תפלתן של צדיקים כעתר מה עתר זה מהפך התבואה ממקום למקום כך תפלתן של צדיקים מהפכת מדותיו של הקב"ה ממדת רגזנות למדת רחמנות

*Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot 64a*

Rabbi Yitzhak stated: Why is the prayer of the righteous compared to a pitchfork? Just as a pitchfork turns the grain [crop] from one position to another, so too does the prayer of the righteous change the dispensation of God from the attribute of anger to the attribute of mercy.

*Rabbi David Wolpe, "Is Anybody Listening" on [www.belief.net/story/14/story\\_1407\\_2.html](http://www.belief.net/story/14/story_1407_2.html)*

A medieval rabbi, Leon Modena, expressed the truth of prayer as follows: Imagine a man in a boat who is pulling himself to shore. If one did not know better, it could appear that he is pulling the shore to himself. But indeed, it is the one in the boat who is being moved, because the shore is fixed. So it is, he said, with prayer. We think that when we pray we are moving God closer to our will. But true prayer does quite the opposite: It moves us closer to God's will.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Have students read the two texts in this section and answer the following questions:
  - a. The word "theurgy" can be defined as "the ability to influence God's will or compel/convince God to do something." What do these two texts have to say about the idea of theurgy? Do you believe that your requests to God have theurgical power?
  - b. Is it possible determine if God is listening when you ask for a favor? How can you tell if God responds?
  - c. How would the above texts respond to the idea of God answering prayers with miracles? Do you think God answers prayers and requests with miracles?
2. Ask students to consider if any of the texts in the study packet have influenced how or when they will make requests to God in the future.

# Additional Resources

- Entering Jewish Prayer by Reuven Hammer. Schocken Books, 1994.
- In Speech and Silence: The Jewish Quest for God by David Wolpe. Penguin Books, 1990.
- My People's Prayer Book: The Amidah edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman. Jewish Lights ,1998.
- Your Word is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer by Arthur Green and Barry W. Holtz (translators). Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993.