



4

Gratitude

The Sufi poet Rumi said your depression is related to your refusal to praise. Heschel reminds us that all of Jewish prayer is praise. Praise is an antidote to depression. When I pray the words of praise, the clots of dissatisfaction soften. The flow of energy pulses with vitality. I am re-energized. ✓

RABBI MARCIA PRAGER

It's easy to pray with a kvetch. Demanding. Victim. Praying from that place engenders separation, not connection. There is a real wisdom in the Torah of gratitude, that the first thing you do when you get up in the morning is say *modeh ani*, I'm grateful.

RABBI TIRZAH FIRESTONE

Gratitude is the everyday heart opener of spiritual practice. ✓
While the heart responds in more dramatic fashion to major life events, good and bad, there is nothing like saying thanks to ground the more routine, and thus the more difficult—and the more important—rhythms of a regular spiritual practice.

It is not coincidental that Jewish services begin with prayers of gratitude, for expressing thanks immediately changes our mood.

As far as I can tell, it is impossible to experience gratitude and anger at the same time.

We tend to notice only when something is broken. When I'm sick, I feel, "Oh, if I was only healthy." When I have bronchitis, "Oh, how wonderful breathing is." I had asthma as a teenager; boy, did I learn about the gift of breathing. I promised to myself, "As long as I live, I will never forget what a gift it is to breathe!" But I don't have asthma anymore. How easy it is to forget. Every day my mom calls me and cries about the macular degeneration that is gradually robbing her of eyesight. It reminds me that I am so grateful to see! When I sing prayers of gratitude for the gift of standing, the gift of walking, the gift of clothing, the gift of food, the gift of my eyesight and my easy natural breathing—for that measure of well-being that enables me to say, "Thank you, God! Enough still works that I'm still here," my heart soars and all grumpiness departs.

RABBI MARCIA PRAGER

Prayers of gratitude keep us from taking things for granted.

"*Barchu et Adonai ha-mevorach*," the call to prayer says, "Let us bless Adonai, who is blessed." This sounds initially like a tautology (which is why, perhaps, so many translations "fudge" the Hebrew). But we don't regard it as tautological or redundant to curse what is cursed. We can vent and complain and pass judgment all day long! The *Barchu* reminds us that it is vital to bless what is blessed. We do it to acknowledge the good, to recalibrate our standards, to inculcate and express gratitude, to experience—and not overlook—our blessings.

RABBI DEBRA ORENSTEIN



Anytime I am truly mindful—when I leave behind thoughts of past or future, move beyond my own story and receive the world around me—something wonderful happens. My heart fills with

gratitude. (Especially if I am with my beloved Jody or out in nature.)

That's how it feels, but in reality, I think the metaphor of "filling" is mistaken. The natural attitude of the heart is already gracious. But it is usually hidden by fear, tension, and the busyness of our lives. A better metaphor might be that prayer "uncovers" what is already there.

Gratitude or praise practice uncovers the everyday gifts of life. As Reb Zalman [Schachter-Shalomi] would say, gratitude is like wifi. You can use it to log on anywhere, anytime. I employ the practice of blessing during the day to keep me aware of the gifts.

RABBI DAVID INGBER

Humility

Gratitude is also important because it requires humility. A prayer from humility's opposite, arrogance, would be an oxymoron.

Prayer teaches us the art of humility and surrender. The Talmud teaches us to stand in the presence of God with our heart looking up toward the heavens and our eyes looking down. It teaches us to embrace the unknown and to muster up our faith in moments of doubt, pain, and anxiety. It reminds us that we are part of a greater existence.

REB MIMI FEIGELSON

Has prayer changed me? It requires humility, gratitude, modesty. It requires a sort of smallness rather than bigness. It's not about making big theological statements; it's about how can my very next move, very next thought, very next smile, very next encounter, be more compassionate, more gracious, more skillful, more helpful, more understanding, more heartfelt.

RABBI NEHEMIA POLEN, PHD

Gratitude soothes tension, creates a feeling of spaciousness, and directs us toward *mochin d'gadlut*, toward expanded consciousness.

The major focus of prayer is learning to express gratitude, to feel the goodness of our lives, to pause to count our blessings, to feel grateful. And when we feel filled with gratitude, there's a natural next step. How might we share the goodness we've received with others?

RABBI ELIE KAPLAN SPITZ

When we are in touch with our sense of yearning and gratitude, we establish the conditions from which prayer might flow. Tapping into our natural generosity, quite literally, opens the heart to our loved ones, to people everywhere, to God.

Yearning and gratitude comprise the emotional foundation of a prayer practice. Now we move to three foundational skills that propel prayer forward: cultivating *kavvanah*, engaging our bodies, and learning to listen deeply.