

“So, What’s New? Does Prayer Matter?”

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Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

We are asking the question, “So, What’s New?” these Shabbos evenings in June. Last week, we were up to our pupils in politics, wondering, “So, What’s New? Will We Get the Government We Deserve?” It was a study in Huey P. Long and the recently resolved mayor’s race. Tonight, as we gratefully open, for the very first time, our long-awaited draft copy of *The New Sinai Siddur*, we ask, “So, What’s New? Does Prayer Matter?”

Since Katrina, of course, there has been a lot of prayer in our city and region. Every faith on Earth has lifted our urgent needs and well being up to God. No doubt, the strength of prayer has been for millions, the single most reliable survival technique of the past ten months.

Mother Nature and human nature continue to throw us all some bitter challenges, causing us to be weary and anxious as we meet each day. And so, prayer might well become a central focus for anyone who would claim the title, “believer.” I hope your prayer life is vital. Does it surprise you that, where hurricanes and all manner of natural threats and disasters are concerned, our Judaism cautions us to be careful how we pray and for what we pray?

For instance, the 17th century Sage, Nachman of Bratislava, cautioned his disciples: “Do not ask that God change the laws of nature for you.”

The Talmud teaches this very tough and sophisticated lesson!

If a person is returning from a journey and hears cries coming from his town and says, ‘May it be God’s will that those cries do not come from my house,’ that is a vain prayer.

Why? Because, the Sages reply, to pray to counter what has already happened is natural and understandable, but it makes a mockery of prayer. Better to pray for the strength to endure whatever the outcome.

How then did the rabbis understand our place in the world? Not unlike the conclusion drawn by Spencer Chapman, a British officer who, during the Second World War, lived all alone in the jungles of Malaysia and fought behind enemy lines. Years later, he wrote a book describing his harrowing experiences.

The question Colonel Chapman was most often asked following his rescue was:

When you were there, Colonel Chapman, was the jungle for you and on your side, or was it against you and on the enemy’s side?

And Colonel Chapman would inevitably reply, “The jungle is neutral.”

Well, so it is! Chapman's observation is a fine metaphor for our lives, too. The world is neutral!

This planet on which we do our best to eke out a living is neutral toward our individual continuance. As children, we learned so quickly that the trees will not cry, nor will the flowers and the clouds, should we fall down and skin our knee.

In making this observation, friends, that the jungle, our world is neutral, the fact becomes unassailable that it comes down to what you and I do and make of it. There are some things we better accept, because they are not going to change. Theologian G.K. Chesterton used to say that, "when we walk over the cliff, you don't break the law of gravitation, you just confirm it and the law breaks you!" Some facts are completely irrefutable and they will not budge just because we bump into them.

I heard about a woman who once went to her doctor and informed him that she didn't like the night air. Her doctor said, "Madam, during certain hours of the 24, night air is all there is!"

We have to recognize this certainty of our existence: certain things are, like them or not, irrefutable facts! The jungle is neutral! That means that the Creator establishes natural law, hurricanes included. What would you say if water flowed down the hill one day and up it the next? What would you say if penicillin cured you on Monday, but proved deadly on Tuesday?

So, here's our question: if the jungle is neutral, what are the implications for prayer? How may we live in this world at our highest? Answer: through prayers of thanksgiving. To be thankful for what has been done for us is a sure sign of maturity. Someone said the other day:

According to Jewish tradition, one becomes a Bar or a Bat Mitzvah by blessing the Torah. But if you want to really know the truth, one becomes a young adult in the process of writing 'thank you' notes.

A sense of gratitude is like an open window to the soul. In the world in which we live, in this "jungle" that is neutral, I have come to believe among the most meaningful prayers are those in which we offer thanks for what we have been given and how we have been spared. Now, I know that isn't what most of you want to hear. What about the needs and fears and anxieties we have over the things that seem to so threaten us? Are they never to be addressed? Are we never to ask or petition? What use is God, if not to come to our aid?

My answer to that is the following: for the individual, for each of us, prayer does work – yes, prayer produces. But, it produces best if we can frame our personal concerns and needs in a different way. Individual prayer elevates if and when we put it in the form of that for which we are grateful.

Why not try this in the new hurricane season? When we go to bed each night, let's briefly ponder the things that might have happened that didn't. The stoplight you ran, for which you did not get a ticket, the car that did not hit you as you changed lanes without looking, the elevator that did arrive safely at the floor you selected, the airplane that did make it home through turbulence, the computer that really did work and didn't freeze up on you, the physical you passed, and the hurricanes that missed us. There have been many of those!

So, here's the point. Prayer does indeed produce, and it produces in great and inspiring abundance. But, don't expect prayer to change the weather report! The jungle is neutral. But, as we so often remind ourselves in the course of our own worship: prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will. "So, what's new about prayer? Nothing, really. But, for God's sake, and for your own, don't give up on it.

Amen