



Prayer as a Tool for Working through Tragedy

Topic

Prayer as a Tool for Working through Tragedy

Grade Level

5th -10th

Goals

Participants will see prayer as an appropriate response to, or tool for dealing with, tragedy.

Participants will explore the ways in which prayers speak to emotions.

Participants will learn the difference between *keva* and *kavanah* as they relate to Jewish prayers.

Participants will learn that not all prayers come from the TaNaCH; some were written by scholars and others by common people.

Participants will have an opportunity to craft their own prayers.

Background for Teachers

Rabbi Eliezer

Rabbi Eliezer said, “One who makes one’s prayers fixed, that person’s prayers are not sincere petitions.” (*Mishnah Berachot* 4:4)

Rabbi Eliezer was a prominent scholar in the first and second centuries. He believed that a person shouldn't say the same prayers every day. His idea makes sense. We don't think the same things or feel the same emotions each day; perhaps our prayers should reflect what is on our minds and in our hearts each day.

Jewish prayer became fixed - or standardized - between the second and fifth centuries. A certain set of prayers were chosen for each of the daily services, with changes and additions for holy days. These services have remained pretty constant over the past 1500 years, though different Jewish communities have made changes due to religious belief.

Though some of the prayers in any Jewish prayerbook come from the TaNaCH, there are also a number which began as one person's expression of their own thoughts about God, their own life, humankind, or even the universe. They wrote, or spoke, prayers based on what they were thinking and feeling.

Keva and Kavanah

In Hebrew, the word *keva* is associated with the word *kavua*, most often translated to mean fixed or stable. *Kavanah* is often translated as intention. In relation to prayer, *keva* refers to the words on the page; *kavanah* is the spirit or intent that someone brings with



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them. Some people use the word *kavanot* to describe personal words that people share to set a tone before reciting a prayer, or words added in addition to those printed on the page.

Materials Needed

Modern Prayer source sheets
Smartphone or tablet for playing music
Pens/pencils and paper

Prepare in Advance

Write the quote from Rabbi Eliezer on the blackboard.
Photocopy Modern Prayer source sheets. There are three prayers on the source sheet, but you may choose to not read/analyze all of them. If you feel as though you may only have time/space for one of the prayers, choose the one you think your students will most connect to.

Description of Activities

Begin by writing Rabbi Eliezer's quote on the board: Rabbi Eliezer said, "One who makes one's prayers fixed, that person's prayers are not sincere petitions." (*Mishnah Berachot 4:4*).

Ask students to name a fixed prayer and describe what fixed prayer means to them.
Ask why Rabbi Eliezer believes that fixed prayers aren't sincere.

Distribute the Modern Prayer source sheets. Let students know that each of these prayers were written in response to crisis. You may choose to have a student read the prayers aloud, and to discuss them as a class; you may choose to have students work in small groups. Ask:

- Is the crisis about which the author is writing apparent from the words of the prayer? Does this matter to your understanding of, or connection to, the prayer?
- Which emotions does the prayer highlight?
- Which emotions do you feel in reaction to this prayer?
- Do you think reading or hearing this prayer would help you in a time of crisis?

If you choose to play the Sarit Hadad song, in addition to or in place of reading the English lyrics, you might also ask if music changes the impact of a piece of poetry or liturgy.



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Inform students that they will be writing their own prayers. We suggest that students write on their own as the prayers often tend to be more personal and, therefore, more powerful. If you feel as though it would better suit your class dynamic, you may place students in pairs to write.

Before writing let the students know:

- Some people pray when something makes them feel helpless; when they feel as if it's the only thing they can do.

Ask:

- What if you could write a prayer about what you were thinking and feeling? What would it say?

Remind them that:

- Some prayers begin with *Baruch atah adonai*, but many do not. They should feel free to begin that way or not.

Write the following prompts on the board to help students get started:

- A prayer when feeling frightened
- A prayer when feeling helpless
- A prayer for a better tomorrow
- A prayer for strength
- A prayer for hope
- A prayer for peace

When everyone has finished writing, ask for volunteers to share their work. This may not be the right time to compel sharing as sometimes students write very personally and might be embarrassed to share.

You might collect the poems and use them later, perhaps without attribution, in a school wide service.