

THOUGHTS *about* PRAYER

a companion to the podcast *Thoughts & Prayers*

Episode 1 – Does Prayer Work?



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to episode 1!

In the first episode of *Thoughts & Prayers*, host **Jessica Fisher** explores one of the oldest and most unsettling questions in Jewish life: Does prayer work? Through deeply personal reflection and conversation with **Sara Labaton**, **Josh Warshawsky**, and **Akiva Mattenson**, the episode traces how ancient mystics, modern rationalists, and everyday seekers wrestle with the meaning and purpose of prayer – whether it changes the world, transforms us, or simply helps us keep knocking on a locked gate. Thoughtful, searching, and grounded in lived experience, this opening chapter invites listeners to reconsider what it really means to pray.

About This Guide

On *Thoughts & Prayers*, we explore how Jewish prayer is at once a communal exercise and a deeply personal practice. The exercise of discussing and reflecting on prayer can also be profoundly spiritual. This companion to the podcast series can be used as a framework for either facilitated group discussion or private reflection.

Opening Question

The episode begins with Jessica Fisher sharing about a time when prayer resonated with a particular moment in her life and a related time where prayer didn't feel as meaningful to her.

The central question of this episode is: "Does Prayer Work?"



Do *you* think prayer works?
In what ways?

Have you experienced events in your life where prayer did or did not feel like a relevant response? Why did praying work or not work for you in that context?

Prayer from the Heart

In her story about her grandmother's missing ring, Sara Labaton suggests that praying isn't necessarily about changing something about God or the world. She offers instead the idea that prayer can impact *us* and how we act in the world, like her practice of praying for healing when she sees an ambulance to remind her that she is obligated to respond to others' suffering.



Are there parts of Jewish liturgy that orient or reorient your behavior outside of prayer spaces? If so, which ones?
If not, are there prayers or rituals, like the ones Sara mentioned, that you could imagine starting to think of in this way?

Sara's story also reflects on a multigenerational relationship to prayer. What role does prayer play in your family life? How do you talk about your prayer life with family or friends?

Finding Meaning Through Representation

Josh Warshawsky's work on prayer education echoes the rabbis of the ancient world by reinterpreting traditional prayers to help people find meaning in them today. He references a Talmudic passage (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b) in which the rabbis debate whether they can use certain words to describe God in their prayers, since those words don't necessarily reflect their lived experience of God.



What does it mean to you that 2,000 years ago, rabbis grappled with the language of our liturgy, unsure if they were accurately describing God and God's role in the world?
Does this feel similar or different to your own relationship to liturgy?

Have you ever reinterpreted a prayer to make it more meaningful, or have you ever heard someone else's reinterpretation?
What was it and why did it work for you?

Prayer is an Act of Care

Akiva Mattenson compares praying to John Ashbery's poem, "At North Farm," about leaving a dish of milk out for a stray cat. He says, "It is a gesture of care, a sign of love that carries no expectations," a way of affirming our commitment to an ongoing relationship with God, even when we might feel that God is absent. One of the challenges of this arrangement is that we, the human beings in the relationship, must keep persevering in maintaining the relationship, often without signs of reciprocation.



Do you have strategies for staying energized and committed to a one-sided relationship or project?
When is that commitment valuable and when is it harmful?

Closing Questions

What are your main takeaways from this episode?

Which model(s) of how to relate to the efficacy of prayer, if any, spoke to you?

What about it worked for you?