



Berkeley Hillel Prize Submissions
Spring 2022

Prayer - הַלְפָתָה

The act of 'praying' is believed to play an essential role in human lives.

Prayer takes different forms according to individual needs—verbally or silently; privately or in the company of others; governed by a known text or uniquely personal.

The act of Praying is often verbalized in traditional wording and can be a way of meditating.

For some, God's attention is the singular focus; for others, peacefulness or communal spirituality.

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

-Mary Oliver

How grateful I am to God that there is a duty to worship, a law to remind my distraught mind that it is time to think of God, time to disregard my ego for at least a moment! It is such happiness to belong to an order of the divine will. I am not always in a mood to pray. I do not always have the vision and the strength to say a word in the presence of God. But when I am weak, it is the law that gives me strength; when my vision is dim, it is duty that gives me insight."

-Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

This year's prompt:

How does or can 'prayer' play a role in your daily life? Please elaborate on the form and character of the act in your life.

Submitted by: Pradeep Ratham

When I first heard about the The Berkeley Hillel Prize, my first thoughts were "Wow I really pray I can win this contest". But it made me pause for a while and ponder, what does it really mean to pray?

Many associate the act of praying to religion. Who we pray to, how we pray ultimately depends on which faith we believe in. However, beyond such distinctions, I believe all of us share some commonalities on why we engage in prayers and how it helps us lead better lives. To me praying represents a longing for a sense of hope. It is an acknowledgement that not everything is within our control, and that we should embrace the uncertainty. Even when all the odds are stacks against us, and having any sense of hope seems irrational, prayers gives us the strength to press on.

When I applied to UC Berkeley as an international student, I knew the chances of me getting in was extremely slim. With a vast number of extremely bright and passionate individuals applying for such limited number of spots, it was almost impossible to imagine getting into the school. While I played my part by doing my best academically, and ensuring I put in my utmost efforts to write my personal essays, there was no guarantee that I will get in. Once I clicked the submit button on my application, everything else was beyond my control. Who read my application, whether the admissions officer was having a good day when reading my essays, or even whether my application was at the top or the bottom of the pile. Would all these factors influence my acceptance? I guess we will never know. All I could do was pray that things will go well. My prayers were an acknowledgement of the fact that we do not have as much control in our lives as we think we have. Beyond my efforts, there are so many factors that could affect the outcome of my results. Prayers, to me, is a reminder that we should not conceited when we attain good outcomes nor take it too harshly when things don't our way. Such an approach to life relieves a lot of stress, and enables me to live life to the fullest.

I think I have played my part by writing an essay that I am proud of. Now all I am going to do is pray :)

Submitted by: Danielle Sobkin

Prayer anchors me to my roots. I recall hiding behind Grandmother's black purse as we walked down Murray Avenue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA. I was baffled to see the Jewish people openly embracing their heritage. The orthodox attire that was ridiculed back in Russia, was unapologetically worn by so many on the street. I felt overwhelmed with a feeling of community. Our small, two-bedroom apartment overlooked the music studio in which I soon discovered my love for violin. Grandmother told me that my parents moved to America to establish roots. It took years for me to understand what that meant.

Prayer cultivates in the form of anonymity amongst presence. A silence that starts from within, yet transcends into something bigger. Prayer is silent, yet loud. Individual, yet community-driven. It is transformative, transversal, and tactful. It connects me to my roots and reminds me of my story.

Prayer is a form of connection and remembrance. It is the time I allot to myself for reflection and realization; it is forever intertwined into my roots. Since my childhood, I have been a fighter. Fighting for my parents' equality as refugees and fighting for my own expressive freedom among peers. The story of my family fuels my constant motivation to overcome initial shortcomings and failures; prayer is the bridge connecting both.

Prayer fosters my relentless passion, fearlessness, and grit. It is a reminder that being lost and scared is natural. We are all a little lost, and that is alright. In my daily life I feel confident and empowered by my risks to preserve my roots. Branching into my future endeavors on campus and collegiate studies, I will continue to defy my intersectionality, strengthen my roots, and fight for religious freedom through prayer.

Prayer has contributed to my mindset of taking risks and embracing challenges. It encourages me to do what is uncomfortable and meet newness with eagerness. Prayer reminds me that we cannot control what happens to us but only how we respond. With any new experience, there is fear. With every change there is hesitation and anxiousness. By embracing these new experiences fully and accepting the fear, hesitation, and anxiousness we can learn more about ourselves and flourish.

I am fearless in my journey because of my firm belief in prayer. It cultivates my creativity and empowers me to search for new outlets for conversations and adventures. Prayer is not simply a way of connecting to religion. It is a way of living and understanding the world around me. It has given me the ability to delve deeper into my roots and seek meaning in my ventures. Prayer inspires me to take risks and continue fighting for my roots.

Submitted by: Tatum Luoma

Growing up, I knew that my Jewish heritage was something I should be proud of. That cultural side of myself was always something that I wished I had more of an opportunity to explore. My mother is Jewish, but my father is a fanatical atheist. Only after my parents' divorce did I realize that my father's opinions were and are riddled with anti-semitic undertones. When I was young, I could not fully comprehend what I was feeling. Now I understand that I was scared to turn to Judaism. The most glaring memory I harbor from my parent's divorce was overhearing my uncle's commentary to my father about why the relationship ended. "That's what you get for marrying a Jewish bitch," he sneered. At that moment, my instinct was to shrink away. Did that mean they thought I was a "Jewish bitch" too? I was shocked, confused, and felt a tremendous weight to stifle any relationship I was seeking with prayer and with my Judaism. I would never be allowed a Bat Mitzvah. I would never go to Synagogue with my mom and sister. I would celebrate Christmas with my father, and Hanukkah with the other side of the family without my father knowing.

When I finally got to college, I was able to explore who I wanted to be without influence from anyone else. It was truly intimidating at first. I do not consider myself a particularly religious person, but I felt like I was still searching for my spiritual identity, for a community, for a purpose, searching for something that I could connect with. My maternal grandma called me during my first few weeks at Berkeley, urging me to join Hillel. I was hesitant at first, wondering if I was "Jewish enough" to join after I had been so unable to bridge the gap between my upbringing and my heritage. Although I joined somewhat reluctantly at first, Hillel has given me a safe space to blossom.

Prayer is something that I am still connecting with and striving to better understand. Judaism teaches one to question, and that really resonates with me. I came from a situation where I had to hide my thoughts and feelings to one where I am encouraged to examine and create my own relationship surrounding prayer and determine what religion means to me. I am not yet at the point where I pray to one, all-knowing thing, to a God. But, allowing myself to search for this "thing" to pray to has almost become a form of prayer in and of itself for me. I am on a path to decipher how prayer will be incorporated into my present and future experience as a Jewish person.

Submitted by: Anonymous

As I sit on the opposite side of the world right now watching the horrors of war unfold in Eastern Europe, I have found myself turning more and more towards prayer as a means of reconciling my feelings of uncertainty, sadness, and extreme fragility, and by the same token, have used prayer as a catalyst for recognizing the immense capacity that humans hold in fostering empowered communities that span across national lines and political boundaries.

I am currently studying abroad in a country in Western Europe, and most recently had attended a protest condemning the acts of war taking place within eastern Ukraine. What I had witnessed at the gathering was astounding, and recalibrated my understanding of what prayer is, and just how powerful it could be. As I reflect on this unforgettable day, I am able to recognize that regardless of their varying ethnic and social backgrounds, their gender identity and sexuality, and even their capacity to communicate in the same language as those around them, the protesters that I accompanied alongside within the center of the city were all united by their universal desire to hope and pray for a better future, and to successfully propagate a collective message that condemned the outcomes of political disagreement and masculine rage.

In a very literal way, I was touched by the solidarity channeled throughout the crowd, and was struck by the collective strife of all of the individuals present on that day rallying together in close quarters to vocalize their desire to pray for a more just, humane, and harmonious world all across the globe. Images of unknown individuals hugging and comforting each other, sounds of unified chants and cries aimed at combating injustice, and feelings of fellowship cultivated throughout substantial groups of people will cease to evaporate from my memory, and likewise will be those that remind me of prayer's ability to not just unite and form communities, but to offer strength to those who otherwise would not recognize their immense potential to bring about great change.

As I move on from this experience, I continue to not just recognize the significance of prayer within spaces outside of my home, but have also begun to incorporate individual practices of expressing gratitude, and for calling upon personal acts of self-empowerment, within my private life as well. Everyday when I wake up, I now purposefully avoid reaching for my phone, and instead dedicate time towards being grateful for my privilege, and to be aware of my responsibility to help others who are not in as fortunate a position as myself. So, as I continue to practice mindful meditation in the form of prayer and expressing gratitude, I have made conscious efforts to carry out acts of kindness without the expectation of receiving anything in return, and do so because I want to cultivate a healthier, more unified, and ultimately brighter world around me.

Submitted by: Emma Tavangari

My mother only prays on airplanes. Or so she says, playing coy with faith.

In those moments, I watch her cover her face with one hand, muttering silently. I always wonder what she says, to whom she says it.

My Judaism is my mother's, but my spirituality is mine alone. She has never been a particularly religious person. Like my father, she is competent, shrewd, and deeply intelligent. They carry an unwavering sense of confidence. It's a defining trait: perhaps because they have surmounted challenges I could never dream of facing, their capacity for self reliance extends far beyond my own.

It has always seemed bizarre to them—and by extension, to me—to externalize a desire for help. I was raised with a specific ethos; valuing autonomy over assistance, even the kind that might bolster you emotionally.

All of this is to say I never knew how to pray, barring the unique possibility of a plane crash. I've never demanded much from my faith: I came late to my Judaism, and only discovered the depths of my commitment in college. I've never known how to pray 'properly', or what might be appropriate to pray for, always distantly aware of the skeptical glances of my two agnostic parents, wondering if as their daughter grew close to some kind of inner spiritual life, she would grow farther from the girl they'd raised her to be. Praying induced a kind of anxiety: it felt like relinquishing my independence, like a cop-out, a solution for those unable to handle things the old-fashioned way.

And then I left home, moving halfway across the world to begin a life in France. Within a week, I'd received news that my grandfather was dying: 603 kilometers away from my new apartment, even less from my new school.

I was unable to visit due to hospital limitations, and I was not willing to take a spot from others more nearby.

All of a sudden, I was completely alone, and for the first time in my life, there was nothing to solve. I could not provide true comfort to my parents overseas, nor could I do so for my grandpa, and the wife he left behind. Helplessness was new to me and entirely unwelcome.

It was in a moment of desperation when humility finally took root. I prayed for my grandpa in my own way, simple and invocative, utterly divorced from the rich tradition of Jewish prayer (save for my own involvement in it). I did not think it would keep him alive. I was not even convinced it would ease his passing, or my grief. I only hoped that the act would give me some modicum of tradition to lean on, and the permission to abdicate responsibility for my pain.

Grief wrenches you inward, as does loneliness. But prayer opens you, turns you back to community, even from thousands of miles away. This is its mystical capacity, one which I will lean on in times to come.

Submitted by: Anonymous

My childhood memories are suffused with the broken symphony of my family yelling. Bottles clinking, voices breaking, doors slamming. I grew up trying to navigate a home life where I felt pulled in two directions, between my mother's cries and my father's screams. I used to roam our backyard, looking up at the sky, praying to whoever was up there. Prayer, to me, was begging G-d to put an end to the noise.

I threw myself into the sport I loved, hoping to drown out the yelling with the cadence of my strokes. Swimming meant two hours a day underwater, alone with my thoughts and away from the echoes of meaningless fights. I saw my sport as a way out of my home life and trained like my life depended on it. Every whistle up to the blocks was a chance to prove that I could get out. Prayer, to me, became a request that all my training would pay off.

But even as I spent less time at home, the concert of negativity seeped into my mental soundtrack. Two hours underwater was no longer peaceful, but incredibly isolating. I struggled with anxiety and depression which manifested in lost friendships and poor performance. What was once a safe space of encouragement became a place of disappointment. I thrived when my coach hollered at me to get through a workout, but I broke when he didn't have any words left and told me to go home. Prayer, to me, had become a trembling plea to break the silence.

Losing swimming forced me to re-envision what my future would look and sound like. I recognized that the broken melody I was so desperately trying to escape would only follow me if I never sat down to fully listen to it. My recovery started when I stepped into a synagogue for the first time. I was sixteen. All I knew was that my mom grew up Jewish. I didn't know the prayers or many of the people around me. But somehow there was something about the voices that felt right. Prayer, to me, became a chance to find my voice.

Five years later and I know most of the prayers. I've been to many synagogues since and have slowly begun repairing my relationship with swimming and home. Our voices rise and fall together in harmony, whether its services or conversations with friends. Prayer, to me, is now a daily gratitude for a community that helped me find comfort in all of the noise.

Submitted by: Maria Pasquau Lope

Someday, I would like to go for a walk in heaven. Imagine that it is full of prayers. I would like to walk around and meet the best version of everyone, even the ones I don't know. How much humanity, love, and transparency can there be in heaven? There is no space for evil in a prayer. Just imagine heaven, filled with those people who, at night, just before going to bed, pray for the people who are suffering right now in Ukraine, or those who have been suffering for years and years and the world doesn't listen to them. Or just that person who prays for their own battles, or for the well-being of their loved ones. People who only ask for love, giving love in return. Without having any guarantee that no one is listening to them.

I think the world would be a nicer place if we were all the version of ourselves that we are when we pray. I never, in any other situation, feel more like myself than when I talk to God. Sometimes I think I don't even talk to God. I think I do it for myself, so I don't lose the humanity we all have inside. Sometimes I like to think that, even if God does not exist, I will be eternally grateful to him: our conversations - which would, in that case, be mine alone with myself - have saved my life. They have kept me from losing track of who I am, who I love, and who loves me.

The other day I was talking to my grandmother, and I realized two things. Whoever is older, is wiser. And whoever is older, is wiser because, at the end of everyone's life, you realize you are only by yourself. My grandmother told me that it is honesty what makes her live more intensely. In her priorities, she lets go of temporary, unimportant matters, because she knows that life is not that long, and should not be wasted. And when she prays, it gives her peace, the peace that we all need. That night I prayed for the first time in a long time, but I did not ask for anything. I was thankful. For everything.

How many mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers have expressed unconditional love for their loved ones one night after another, without expecting anything in return? Is there anything that makes us more human?

Submitted by: Nina Greenberg

“And now, a few moments of silent prayer.”

I’ve never known what to do during silent prayer. Growing up, I’d instinctively shut my eyes, hold in giggles as my younger brother poked me and whispered something in my ear. We were 10 and 8 years old, and the only motivation we had to come to services were the chocolate-chip cookies served during the Oneg.

At that point in my life, my definition of prayer had manifested itself as a one-way conversation between me and God. The minutes of silent prayer during weekly Shabbat services seemed to stretch on and on, seconds audibly ticking away. I’d keep my eyes closed, focus on my breathing. Clear my head, try to speak with God. No voice ever answered; I’d spend those minutes enveloped in the dark space of my mind. For years this continued: the deafening silence of the silent prayer.

By the time I was 14 and freshly Bat Mitzvah-ed, I’d given up on praying. I had begun working as Madrichim, and was preparing for Confirmation. My mother had officially filled the role of Cantorial Soloist at my synagogue, and as the melodies of songs like Havana Shira or Lecha Dodi carried through our house, I’d saunter downstairs to the piano room and playfully sing along, messing around with harmonies and learning lyrics. It wasn’t long before she asked me to join her in leading the music of Shabbat services.

At first it was just one song. I’d sing the solo Elohai NeShama, or take lead on Sim Shalom. But congregants began to approach us following services, complimenting our voices and sharing how moved they were by the sound of our song. How hearing us sing together allowed them to delve deeper into their own prayer and spirituality. Suddenly I was accompanying my mom every week on every song.

I’m not sure when it clicked that what I was doing, singing and sharing my voice, was my own form of praying. Perhaps it was the moment when I realized that I didn’t need to hear God’s voice in my head—my voice was answered by my congregation. I sang Misheberach and we prayed for healing. I sang Shalom Rav and we prayed for peace. No longer did I dread the silence of the silent prayer; it became a moment of reflection, a moment to steady myself before launching into Yih’yu L’ratzon or Oseh Shalom. Song and prayer blended together, grounding me in my Jewish identity and giving me strength. After the horrors of the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting, when my synagogue hosted a vigil, fear and sorrow filling my heart, I sang to a crowd over a thousand strong, anger and sorrow fueling my prayer. And again they echoed, a chorus of voices, joined together in song, singing and praying together as one.

Submitted by: Tohar Zamir

Tikva

I don't really know how to pray.

I tell myself that every night when I try. Swaddled in soft blankets, bathed in the onyx dark, tense and listening to the placid silence around me, I clench my eyes and take a deep breath. Nobody ever taught me what praying alone is like. As a child, I would go to beit kneset often, a practice that I uphold today. There's comfort in the community, in the routine; I have the book in front of me, my family guides me when I forget a word—yet now I lay still, far from home, congregating with none other than myself and God.

I begin to speak, barely above a whisper, starting the only way I know how:

“ברוך אתה אדוני אלוהינו מלך העולם...”

“Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam...”

This mantra fades out, and hesitantly I approach God with my requests. I plead for my family's health, for good grades, for ways out of whatever inconvenience engulfs my life at the time—I pray, and before the ultimate “amen,” I thank God. It's never for the same reason; as my life morphs and changes, I appreciate different aspects. On days where I don't feel thankful, I still say that I am grateful for the ability just to pray.

Yet I'm not discouraged. Prayer for me is not about whether or not my desires are fulfilled. The most important function, instead, is as a daily affirmation of hope.

It is hope that underscores my commitment and my faith. The vast and unyielding uncertainty of the human condition necessitates it. In the morning I rise, rinse my mind of the past day's burden, and find solace in the genuine belief that my troubles will be resolved. My dad's chemo will work, I will find housing, Sliver will have my favorite pizza—from the most serious to the most trivial, I am compelled to use prayer as a way to affirm that there is hope.

Likewise communal prayer, be it kiddush or kaddish, provides a deep comfort in the ability to hope together. Collective aspiration amplifies the individual experience of hope I reaffirm nightly; the reality of seeing so many engaged in the same act, the same faith that life has the ability to improve, provides the structural basis by which I know that life can improve.

So I lay in bed every night, and I believe that I can not pray. Yet I do; I pray out loud, not so that God can hear it—so that I can hear it. Nightly I consciously remind myself that I am praying, that I am capable of rising above the crushing anxieties of academia and reality, and that faith—that hope—can enable me to persevere.

I know how to hope, I know how to pray.

Submitted by: Emily Bass

Sh'ma, Yisrael.

Two words, five syllables. The first words I hear when I wake up. Every day. Spoken softly in my mind, I am reminded of my mortality; I am blessed to be alive.

Hear, O Yisrael: I realize I am called to prayer in the same way we call to Jerusalem. I remember the note I left inside the Wall. My prayer is not alone. Enveloped alongside countless others, it rests within the embrace of thousands of years of history. The Wall inhales and exhales our voices, nurturing and sustaining them.

Adonai eloheinu.

Prayer is survival. Our survival. Prayer is the blood, sweat, and tears of my ancestors, the chosen people, brutalized and persecuted for their faith. But my people are resilient; they are not gone. Through prayer, I speak their words. Abandoning my selfish individualism, I am their flesh and blood: a living extension of our shared history.

I am governed by tradition; I am guarded by tradition. This is why I choose to speak these sacred, fraught phrases: I find peace, spirituality, and resonance in this uniformity. Rooted by my practice, informed by my tradition, I find myself.

I think of my grandmother, whose family left Iraq in search of safety. I think of my great uncle, who survived the Holocaust. I mourn the loss of his family and those millions of spirits who too were not so lucky. They are canonized through these sacred words, preserved in melody. Their memories persist and resist, sweet reminders of a bitter past. To honor them, I pray.

Their souls enrich the soil on which the land of milk and honey continues to grow.

Adonai echad.

Prayer is community. I think of my synagogue, and I think of my Hebrew school. Cradled within the safety of our sacred space, we connected. All ages, all backgrounds. We were harmonious, every Sunday, singing in a single Jewish voice.

God is one; we are one.

Baruch, sheim k'vod. K'vod, malchuto.

Prayer is gratitude. I thank God, and I contemplate my blessings. I am grateful to my people, for our rich and trying history; I am proud to be a Jew.

Prayer is meditation. But it is not thoughtless, nor escapist. It is grounding. I connect with my God; I connect with myself. The words I recite, silently, melodically inside my head.

I may be alone, but I am whole, filled with faith.

L'olam vaed.

The last two words I hear when I fall asleep. Every night.

God will bless you; God will guard you.
God will be kind to you; God will give you peace.
Amen.

Submitted by: Anonymous

I was born with a special type of brain that always prays.

Last year, I was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder. It is defined as uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts and behaviors, and the urge to repeat them constantly. For some, this could mean washing their hands fifty times a day for fear of contamination. It is also marked by intrusive disturbing imagery.

OCD is highly misunderstood and incredibly different from sufferer to sufferer. For me, among other things, it means my thoughts run differently. If a regular brain has many roads, some with dead ends, mine is filled with roundabouts. If, for others, the hamster tires out at the wheel, mine will run until its soles bleed.

A person with OCD cannot suppress their intrusive thoughts with willpower. So, sufferers find compulsions to cope, convincing their brain that they can control reality with these actions.

Here's the serendipitous part: these compulsions have a special name that professionals call them: rituals.

Rituals, normally, can be as simple as brushing one's teeth, to ones as holy as praying. They create structure, predictability, and peace. The same goes for OCD rituals - when thoughts are out of control, rituals help bring some (albeit fake) order to reality.

My OCD forces me to pray constantly. When my soles are bloodied, my brain moves at lightspeed: please let my family live please let them be healthy please please please. Directed at no one, moving with colossal force, these ritualistic thoughts form an anxiety that is cyclical.

What a painfully broken, narrow view of prayer! Prayer is not meant for favors. It should not be the disturbing impulses of my subconscious.

But what if there is an opportunity to set intention? The hope is not to kill the overzealous runner. It is not to take the rock of sisyphus' back. At its best, it is to stop running before your soles bleed. This comes with the understanding of a couple painful truths:

One - I cannot control reality. Two - I cannot control anyone's reactions. Three - I cannot control the universe. Four - I am letting go of that. Most importantly, Five - If what awaits me is indeed those darkest realities, I will cope with or survive them.

Prayer involves asking God for the wisdom and strength to overcome. Treatment for OCD focuses on our learned strength to cope. Judaism, for me, will always be linked to beauty, but never uncoupled from pain. Half of my family perished in the Shoah, the rest live as refugees from antisemitic regimes - some safely, some, a ten second run from a bomb shelter, and others

experiencing displacement as I write this. Worry will always be associated with my Jewish identity, but so is the strength to overcome it.

What a sad life we live to compare such a holy act to a mental illness. What an even sadder life it would be if we couldn't find inspiration in our birthright to overcome the obstacles we are placed on this earth with.

Submitted by: Anonymous

“Praying for freedom never did me any good ‘til I started praying with my feet.” –Frederick Douglass

“Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs.” –Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Tap dancing is my prayer. When I set my feet to the ground, I am reminded of the hopeful possibilities for humans and Earth. With a single step: let there be light. A shuffle: let dry ground appear. A fluttering flap: every winged bird according to its kind. Making contact with the floor, I pay tribute to the origins of creation and the foundations of human innovation – here is the dirt that lets me eat, the land that lets me weep, the soil that lets me sleep. Here is the product of centuries of Black resistance, the rhythmic genius of a people in chains, the artifact of perseverance against all odds. In the space between the sound lies my gratitude and joy, my belief in a better future.

I have been tap dancing since I was seven years old. It took on spiritual significance for me when I awakened to the climate crisis. As a student in Sustainability Science and Practice, I am often overwhelmed by a prophecy of planetary catastrophe. We are, scientists suggest, approaching the apocalypse. Tap dancing foregrounds an alternate narrative — that our footprint on this planet might be beautiful. Through its history and physical practice, tap dance invites me to remember and to re-imagine. We are not beholden to the actions of our fossil-fueled forefathers; we have the wisdom of inspired ancestors.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass*: “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.” Last year I founded a Dayenu Circle to translate my love of earth into defense of its socio-ecological systems. I put my foot down against corporate greed and elite apathy. Yet I could not have done it without the spiritual power of tap dancing. As my activism centers an ethic of anti oppression — anti-greed, anti-racism, anti-oil — tap dancing reorients me toward a positive envisioning. This centuries- old ritual of collaboration with the earth helps me hear in real-time our sacred bond with the planet, so that I can experience the love of the earth as life-giving music.

Our Jewish tradition invites us to hear divinity in prayer every day: “Hear O Israel: the lord is our God, the lord is One.” We are called to listen to oneness. When I tap dance, I can hear it. I make whole the brokenness of humans without earth, earth without humans. The flow of foot against floor is the remembrance of our necessary interconnectedness, our capacity for co-creation.

Submitted by: Celia Serrato

'i once was'

i once was a river flowing wild and free
i once was a bluebird's song carried by the breeze i once was every drop of water in the deep blue
sea i once was tall and strong, i was a redwood tree
i once was a seed

planted deep beneath

my mother Earth

& in Spring she gave birth

to me & all my siblings: the trees & the flowers & the bunnies & the bees... and today as i plant
my bare feet on her bare Earth once more
i wonder... could it be?

that i am still that breeze and you are still that seed?
could it be that those lying, stealing, hoarders
taught us the idea/lie of borders?

borders built between the land & all her children, between life & death, between you & i, between
past, present & future, between the Earth & Cosmos, between spirit & matter

oh but you see, this is the thing about a lie, it can be undone with the truth
and the truth is...
we are all connected to each other, to the spirits, to our ancestors & our future generations, to the
seeds & the trees & the flowers & the fish & the birds & the bees & the breeze
to the threads & the dyes, to the songs & to the ceremonies to the hands that weave & to the
hands that feed.

we must re(member) to forget
we must resist & reject civility, modernity, and patriarchal coloniality
because they killed the Native in themselves before they tried to kill the Native in us

they could not stand that they had built a lonely and artificial world of isolation
& when they found our Native ancestors they could not understand why we loved and prayed to
the land

they envied our matrilineal societies, the way we respected and revered our woman, our children,
our ancestors, our elders, our queer and two-spirit relatives, all of our Earthly & Cosmic
relatives, those who walked on two legs and four and more, those who took to the sky & those
who dove in the sea

they envied the way we danced & the songs we would sing our prayers and ceremonies
the way cried & laughed & ate

the way we honored the seeds, fire, wind & water our deep joy, gratitude & pleasure
so now i wonder... could it be?

that when you and i reject civility...when we cry, sing, dance, love, weave & pray...when we laugh
& we play

we are rejecting their violently imposed offer, renouncing their ways

they tried to kill the Native in us to disconnect us from the Native land, but they did not realize
that our bodies are also Native land and (seeds) have been planted all throughout & they are
ready to sprout this Spring

i hope my child that tonight you cry, pray, dance & dream

i hope my child that you return to the body of the Earth/your body that is Earth and you put down
their weapons and whisper ... i am done with the war...i am finally coming home...

Submitted by: Liana Rokh

Strolling through an ethnically and culturally rich Odessa in the mid 1900s, you might hear some klezmer tunes, accompanied by scents of fresh vegetables, bitter herbs, and spotting a Ukrainian-Jewish babushka (grandmother) cooking borscht through a window. On a beautiful spring morning in 1949, dedulya (my grandfather) was born. In this post-war environment, living in one of very few Jewish communities in the Soviet Union was extremely risky. Identities were being squashed along with basic freedoms; while dedulya's grandparents were able to practice Judaism in the confines of their home in the early 20th century, by the time dedulya was born, not even that was safe to do. Synagogues were prohibited, and the expression of beliefs and practice of traditions was scorned. So, while dedulya grew up in a Jewish family, his identity was purely made up of cultural facets, hiding any ounce of religion deep down.

In 1991, dedulya, babulya (my grandmother), and their only daughter, my mom, made the journey across the Atlantic and landed in San Francisco. Escaping the Soviet Union as refugees, their immigration story has been full of ups and downs. But the ability to harness the inner workings of one's identity and freely practice religion was a new concept to my family. Only here was dedulya finally able to explore his religious roots and connect with his concealed Judaism.

Ten years later, I was born. Growing up in a bustling and rapidly moving San Francisco, my life rarely brought moments of peace or mindfulness. My family was working extremely hard to make ends meet and to raise my sister and me in better conditions than their own. Because of this, religion and spiritual practices often fell to the back burner. It was not until high school when I attended a Hanukkah Shabbat event with Jewish Family and Children's Services at a senior residence that I first encountered a formal prayer ritual. It was a beautiful process, from the lighting of the candles, to bringing in the light to oneself, to reciting Hebrew phrases as blessings.

I was fascinated, so once the evening ended, I went home and began researching the history of the Kiddush and the HaMotzi. The following Friday, I urged my family to celebrate Shabbat at home. We spent the afternoon cooking together, and while the sun set, I led the blessings, reading off my notes from the previous weekend. As each Friday rolled around, I was grateful to have this opportunity to reconnect, recharge, and reflect on the week past. Taking that pause was a meditative experience and helped strengthen my connection to my values and identity. Although my personal prayer practices may not happen every day, praying as part of Shabbat rituals has become a meaningful way for me to set intentions and refine my spirituality. The ability to pray freely has fortified my connection to Judaism and has reinforced the important role that being Jewish has on my identity.

Submitted by: Anonymous

As we are all different in our unique ways, the concept of praying is as well. In my eyes, praying has helped me rise up to my fullest potentials and overcome the multiple obstacles in my life. As a young child, I used to watch the show Arthur. I remember the episode in which DW opened a potato chip bag and one of the potato chips was green. Throughout my life, I have always felt, as I was that green potato chip. I am on the Autism Spectrum and though I am a very social person, it has always been difficult for me to blend in with the other chips in the bag. I grew up in an affluent suburb in southern Florida where it was vital for everyone in the bag to rise to the top. As the green potato chip, it was often a struggle for me to blend in socially with everyone else and school was always a struggle for me. I would pray to god to help me reach my fullest potentials with hope to thrive as the green potato chip just wanting to fit in. I prayed that I would try to find my place in the bag. With lots of hard work and praying to believe in my own self, I did manifest this destiny. I almost did not graduate from high school, but by praying to believe in myself, I ultimately did. After a year at community college, I went on to transfer to university.

I was first hesitant and each year I thought of dropping out, but I did not and not only did I end up getting a bachelor's degree, I also met my husband to be, who is my ultimate fan. He has helped supplement my prayer to believe in myself. In 2018, a tragedy struck my hometown. A shooting happened at my high school and 17 innocent students and teachers lost their lives. Though I graduated years before, that high school was a part of me and I wanted to help support the other chips in the bag. A few of my friends and many siblings of my friends were attending the high school at that time. Some of them were feeling hopeless in the aftermath. I told them they need to believe in themselves and keep on going and follow the motto of the high school, which was "Be The Change In The World," which was printed on the walls in the school, and they did. I believed in myself as well. Now I am a preschool teacher and am pursuing a master's degree. As the green potato chip, I have discovered my way of praying is in the form of hope, which is believing in myself to help make the world a better place. Praying does not have to happen in a temple.

The world is our temple.

Submitted by: Olivia Yanover

After the death of the famous Ruth Bader Ginsburg, I felt pure devastation and hurt for the loss incurred by her passing. I was connected to her presence and her work as a citizen and as a Jewish woman. The night that news of her passing was released, my sister and I agreed to attend a vigil in her honor.

The scene was somber, consisting of a socially distanced group of around 75 people gathered around the entrance to the Pasadena courthouse. Upon our arrival, we slipped into the crowd holding a yahrzeit candle as well as a copy of our Mourner's kaddish. During a lull in the stories, my sister asked if we should say the prayer in her honor. Feeling overwhelmed and nervous, the daunting task of honoring Ruth Bader Ginsburg came at the cost of exposing my vulnerability. In spite of this, I stepped off the curb towards the center, my sister holding the lit candle and, in my hands, the Mourner's Kaddish.

As I introduced myself and explained what the Kaddish was, I immediately felt tears coming on. With the initial "Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba," I began to lose my focus on the text and allow my mind to drift towards the memory of RBG herself. To me, Ruth Bader Ginsburg represented a powerhouse of justice, someone who fought for the rights of myself, my family, and millions of others. The lack of her presence on this Earth felt like a crushing addition to everything going on during this year. Before her passing, I had already felt like I had lost control over my own environment. The handling of the virus was beyond my ability to wear a mask. My excitement to lead the programs I had been cultivating throughout high school was trampled by a virtual curriculum. My hopes for a government that represented and held a voice for myself was absent under this frightening administration.

As the last stanza was approaching, my focus blurred from the lines of prayer and gave way to the real meaning of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's legacy. With her passing, millions of her followers offered up a new counter to the phrase "May her memory be for blessing, instead "May her memory be a revolution." Her life, as well as her death, have inspired me to take the reins in my own hands. While there are many factors that may dominate me and be out of my control, it is my duty to continue towards my personal goals. I can control my personal handling of the virus, how I want to reinvent the programs that were traditionally in-person, and my fight for the rights of others through protests, petitions, and never-ending effort. With hope behind every word, I put force into each concluding "Amen." As the words "v'al kol-yisrael, v'imru" spilled out of my mouth, sobs followed. The prayer's final "Amen" was concluded with flowing tears, unwavering pride, and a fresh understand

Submitted by: Anonymous

A Hill of White Irises

Take a hike to the top of the mountain I live on, and you'll find a trail. Climb that trail until you reach the highest point on the landscape, and you'll start to see short, royal-purple irises. They lay close to the ground with short stems. Continue upwards, and you will begin to enter a shaded forest area. If you pay attention, you will notice the flowers get lighter and lighter. The stems are taller, and the petals are pastel purple with buttery yellow streaks. When you find yourself in the deepest, shadiest part of the forest, you'll find the most spectacular sight of all.

The irises are now tall, the length of your forearm, and pale cream with speckles of yellow. They span in hundreds under the trees. The irises fascinate me every year. They seem full of secrets and answers.

As I grow into my religious identity, I've extensively practiced one of the great Jewish traditions, questioning. I've especially turned over the question about the role of prayer in my life. When I'm asked, 'Are you religious?' or 'Do you believe in G-d?' I want to answer in a definite way. I participate in campus Hillel events; I attend Shabbat; I pray in a form that feels true to me. But, do these things make me religious? While I can turn these questions over indefinitely, rubbing them smooth like a stone in my mind, I have found clarity on the small hill with the white irises.

In the same way that another Jew may find themselves in the written prayer, I find the greatest prayer I can offer is in the inexplicably connected feeling I get from being on the hill of irises. In those moments, I am singularly focused on a time and space. I feel connected to the earth, my ancestors, and the history that I carry on as a Jewish woman. My prayer focuses on recognizing these thoughts and feelings. And while I too find meaning in the written prayer and the responsibility of tradition, it is not where I find a prayer that is most true to myself. The space I'm provided by the silence in the trees is one in which "another voice may speak" (Mary Oliver).

I interpret this voice as a feeling of deep connection to the natural world and the presence of G-d that runs through nature. I have found a place to pray how I feel most represents me, whether in the form of words or in the sweet opportunity to surrender the pressure to find 'the words'. It is also a place where I can let go of a concrete answer to my Jewish questions and accept nuance in my beliefs. My relationship with prayer may change, but for me, its presence is undeniable and ever-present in my daily life.

Submitted by: Daisy Friedman

The first time I saw a love story that I identified with was *The Fault in Our Stars*; I was in 5th grade. Maybe it was the way that they loved each other despite their illnesses or the care that they took with each other's bodies, but something in that film lit a fire in me; I needed more of those stories.

Ever since my triple organ transplant at the age of three, my body has morphed into a subway map of scars etched onto my skin like train tracks crossing every which way. Throughout my childhood, I've had a lot of questions from people. "Will they ever go away?" "How did you get those?" There was one, however, that influenced my perspective forever: "Do you think someone will ever love you looking like that?"

This question ruminated in my mind for the better part of my adolescence. I did not know the answer to the question because I had only seen people who looked like me be loved despite their differences, not because of them. That is until I came across the distinct words "B'tzelem Elohim" in my Torah study at Temple. All people are made in the divine image. There it was, a guiding piece of Jewish text telling me that my body was worthy of God's image just as it was. Prayer gives me permission to be comfortable in my own body and my own skin.

Connecting with my Judaism through prayer made me realize that I belong in whatever room I walk into, not because anybody else validated that, but because I knew that with every fiber of my being. Praying as a Jewish person means that I am a part of a holy community whose only criteria for acceptance is the promise to come as I am and use my uniqueness to change the world.

I promise to do just that. As a Jewish woman, I know what it feels like to not feel seen. I carry the weight of the misrepresentation of my community on my shoulders, but all it has made me want to do is write the stories of those who have never seen their true stories reflected back at them. To me, participating in the act of prayer means that I come from a line of strong women who did not fight for a seat at the table but whose husbands brought them the chair and pulled it out for them.

Every time I pray, I feel the hands of the matriarchs on my shoulders, and they propel me to move forward in my journey. It is a journey of activism, feminism, self-acceptance, self-love, and the continuous exploration of pride in my Judaism. Prayer has shown me that the first step in allowing others to love my non-normative body is for me to love it, and it has given me the tools to do just that. My Judaism is empowerment. My prayer is acceptance. My body is B'tzelem Elohim.

Submitted by: Lindsay Staub

It Feels Like Prayers

I pray sometimes. Before bed, lying on my back, my eyes shut as if I'm already asleep. Or when a friend asks me to facetiously, so that they can pass a test they haven't studied for or run into a particular boy on their way to class. And sometimes I do, clasping my hands together, looking up at the ceiling, asking out loud for the one thing my friend has asked for. I pray in temple when I'm supposed to, reading aloud the Torah portions transliterated so I, someone who doesn't speak Hebrew, can sound out the words and join along.

Prayers, to me, feel so literal, a voicemail left to God offering praise, repenting, asking for help. But answers to prayers feel much more ethereal, even unrelated to my requests. Like, I pray to ask God for my family's health, but I never think of their good health as God's answer.

Sunlight, especially in the winter and spring, feels like an answer to a prayer. The sky is blue, and I can hear birds and bristling leaves and my roommate jumping rope in the backyard. Sunlight reminds me of life, in myself, in the world.

Reading is both a prayer and an answer to one. It's magic incarnate, black words on yellowed pages becoming images and feelings. It is a way of asking to feel understood and being given the opportunity to understand.

It's even crying in class. Watery eyes as we read *Romeo and Juliet*, either because Shakespeare is so confusing and having to study it feels painful, or because "My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand / To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss" is a beautiful line. And before anyone could turn around and see, I brush the evidence of this prayer, or its answer, off my cheeks and return to highlighting the play on my desk before me. That kind of wave of emotion is also like a prayer.

Sticky notes from friends, ones that say things like "I'll miss you" or "Text me this weekend." The smell of my mom's perfume, the one she has been wearing since I was young and would take naps on her bed. Now, fifteen years later and a college student, smelling that Narciso Rodriguez, both floral and musky, reminds me of love and comfort and home. And when I miss my mom most, like celebrating my birthday without her or going weeks missing each other's phone calls, catching her perfume is the purest form of an answer to a prayer.

For a long time, I was embarrassed about praying: if I was doing it wrong, if I misunderstood what I should be saying, if looking up at a cloudless sky and thinking that God could hear me and understood was a silly and selfish expectation. But the way a meaningful passage in a story or the chorus of a song makes me feel, of course I equate it with a prayer and its answer.

Submitted by: Brian Zargar

My Jewish Identity

I wasn't raised religiously Jewish. My parents, growing up in post-revolutionary Iran under an oppressive regime, couldn't practice their religion openly under threat of persecution. My mother frequently recounts stories of her childhood, waking to the sound of rocks shattering her bedroom window. As a result, my family, like many other Persian Jews, developed a cultural Jewish identity, but not a religious Jewish identity.

It wasn't until I began my college career that I started to look at religion as a fundamental part of my identity. The primary source of this shift in my lifestyle was my activity with the Jewish organizations on campus, including both Chabad and Hillel. These international organizations, committed to the advancement of Jewish values and people, have been incredibly impactful in terms of evolving how I view and interact with my community in general. Such a shift began when, through Chabad and Hillel, I found a group of people with shared life experiences as my own, seeking a better understanding of their collective history and their place in the world.

Together with my fellow students and with the help of our beloved Rabbi, I have come to have a deeper understanding of Jewish history, scripture, and what it means to be Jewish than I ever hoped to.

However, to paraphrase my Rabbi, the true value of finding a religious identity comes not by applying content and history to memory, but by applying what one has learned to better the world around them. This message has come to impactfully resonate with my Jewish identity and has best manifested itself through my relationships within my community. This first began to occur within my familial relationships. As my Jewish identity grew and I began to see the world through a new lens, I saw a direct correlation to my ability to empathize, particularly with my brother.

For years, our relationship could only be described as strained, but since I have adopted a sense of religiosity into my life, this has considerably evolved. My family dynamic has since been more peaceful and collaborative, rather than dysfunctional. As a result, Hillel and Chabad have been the greatest non-academic educational opportunities in which I have participated.