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Is Prayer Ever Futile? Three Contemporary Perspectives

As I sat with the parents of a very sick young patient who was in emergency surgery, I knew the patient's chances of survival were not good. "Can we say some prayers for her speedy recovery?" the patient's father inquired. "Of course!" I responded, and we proceeded to recite *Tehillim* (Psalms) and a *Mi Sheberach* (healing prayer). No sooner had we finished praying then I received a call letting me know that the parents were about to receive the worst news possible. We grieved together. When I went to visit them during *shiva* the next week, the father of the patient intently made his way through the throngs of people gathering to offer their condolences, pointed right at me, and cried "Rabbi, your prayers didn't work!"

This incident brings up crucial questions. In addition to examining the efficacy and goals of prayer in general, we must specifically address the question of prayer in this situation. How should we approach prayer for an end-stage termi-

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nal patient, for whom medical professionals predict no chance of recovery? It is precisely at these moments that families of patients frequently ask their rabbis to hold “*Tehillim* rallies” (gatherings to recite Psalms) or to recite other prayers in the hope that they will contribute to a miraculous recovery. Are such activities encouraged by classic Jewish texts and rabbinic scholars? We will examine three recent leading rabbinic authorities’ approaches to this issue, along with some of the sources that support each of their opinions.

I. R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach

R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach takes a very cautious approach to this issue, ruling that prayer for an end-stage terminal patient who is suffering and for whom there is no known medical cure is forbidden under the prohibition against praying for a miracle.¹ This prohibition is based on a *mishnah*:

To cry out over an occurrence which has passed is to utter a prayer in vain. [For example,] if a man’s wife is already pregnant and he says, “May it be Your will that my wife give birth to a male,” this is a prayer in vain. Similarly, if one is coming along the road and he hears the sound of screaming in the city, if he says, “May it be Your will that this is not taking place within my house,” this is a prayer in vain.²

1 *Nishmat Avraham, Yoreh De’ah* 335:4 (12). Similarly, it has been reported that when R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv was asked whether one should pray for the recovery of someone who was brain dead, he answered, “This is a vain prayer!” See Moshe Halbertal, “The Limits of Prayer,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2010). In a personal communication with the author, it was explained that the context of the question was actually even broader; R. Elyashiv said that praying for any patient who the doctors say has no chance of survival is considered a prayer in vain.

2 *Berakhot* 9:3. A similar point is made in *Rosh Hashanah* 17b-18a regarding prayer for an ill person or for someone in other dangerous situations.

This ruling is codified by *Shulchan Aruch*.³ R. Auerbach cites the note of R. Akiva Eiger there: “It is forbidden for a person to pray that God perform a miracle that includes a deviation from the natural order.”⁴

Furthermore, R. Auerbach writes that it is best to avoid public prayer gatherings for a person whose physicians have already given up on curing. R. Auerbach was concerned that if people’s prayers are frequently not answered and the patients do not recover, this would lead to a weakening of their faith. Thus, in such a case, one should not specifically pray for the patient to be cured, but rather that “it should be good for the ill person and their family,” that the patient not suffer, and that

In such cases, the *gemara* states, prayer recited before the divine decree is issued can be answered, but prayer said after the determination of a divine decree cannot be answered. R. Saadia Gaon (*Emunot Ve-De’ot* 5:6) seems to incorporate these rulings into his systematic presentation of Jewish belief when he writes that there are seven things that prevent prayer from being accepted, the first of which is “prayer after a divine decree has been issued.” He bases this view on God’s rejection of Moshe’s prayer to enter the Land of Israel after it had been decreed that he could not go in (*Devarim* 3:23). *Sefer Hasidim* (95) strengthens this point by quoting the *mishnah* in *Berakhot* and arguing that it is forbidden to pray for anything that is improper (“*eino ra’ui*”). Even though it is indeed possible for God to do these things (“*af al pi she-yesh yekholet be-yad Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu la-asot ken*”), it is still considered a prayer said in vain. Similarly, the Gra comments on our *mishnah* that even though God is capable of answering our prayers with a miracle, asking God to do so still qualifies as a prayer said in vain (*Shenot Eliyahu, Berakhot* 9:4).

3 *Orah Hayim* 230:1.

4 *Hagabot R. Akiva Eiger, Shulchan Arukh*, ad loc. R. Auerbach quotes this source in *Halikhot Shlomo, Hilkhhot Tefillah*, ch. 8, n. 56. Interestingly, R. Auerbach conflates prayer for a miracle with prayer in vain.

There are many more sources and nuances related to the issue of praying for (and benefiting from) miracles, as well as regarding the issue of when it is permitted to pray for a patient to die (which R. Auerbach mentions in the context of our discussion in *Minhat Shlomo* 91:24). These sources are beyond the focus of this paper. For a summary of approaches and exceptions to this ruling against prayer for a miracle, see R. Yehuda Turetsky, “Prayer and the Terminally Ill Patient,” *Verapo Yerape* 4: 146-9.

God mercifully do that which is right in His eyes.⁵

R. Auerbach would counsel teachers to instruct their students not to become accustomed to thinking that all prayers are answered the way they want them to be. Rather, he would tell students to view themselves as children standing before a parent; each child asks for something different, and the compassionate parent makes his own accounting of how to respond. A person should pray for his needs, not expect an immediate answer, and rely on the fact that God – Who knows all of the specific accountings of the world – will do the right thing.

R. Auerbach notes out that even when circumstances are bleak, one should never lose hope in God's capability of bringing a cure, should He so choose. However, argues R. Auerbach, even as we maintain hope and trust in God, we should not engage in numerous, persistent prayers for a miraculous cure, for the reasons mentioned above.⁶

This approach recognizes the pitfalls of false hope and seeks to protect us from the dangers of excessively irrational optimism. In my case, then, perhaps it would have been better not to have acquiesced to the father's request for healing prayers, but rather to have found some other way to calm him in a compassionate but realistic manner.

II. The Steipler Gaon

R. Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, known as the Steipler Gaon, takes a different approach to this issue. He is quoted as arguing that it is a mistake to ever lose hope in the value of prayer, even for a desperately ill patient who has no chance of recovery according to the laws of nature.⁷

⁵ *Halikhot Shlomo, Hilkhos Tefillah*, ch. 8, n. 56.

⁶ *Ibid.* It is possible that R. Ovadia Yosef was of the same opinion as R. Auerbach, as the prayer he suggests to use in situations in which it is permissible to pray for someone to die is: "Have mercy on this patient and revive him, but if the decree has already been issued, remove his suffering and do what is right in your eyes" (*Hazon Ovadia, Aveilut* 1:39).

⁷ *Sefer Toledot Yaakov*, p. 118.

R. Kanievsky offers five reasons for this view. First, even if the patient is not cured, it is possible that his or her suffering will be slightly diminished as a result of our prayers. Second, the patient may live a little bit longer than he would have otherwise, and this also has tremendous value. A third reason is based on the Talmudic statement that, “Even if a sword is placed on one’s neck, one should not despair of God’s mercy.”⁸ Even if it seems impossible, R. Kanievsky points out, there are numerous stories about people who have been miraculously cured, and we should thus never give up. Fourth, even if the prayers do not result in any change at all in the patient’s condition, they are nevertheless a source of merit for him or her. All of those who prayed aroused Heavenly compassion through their prayers, which were uttered specifically because of this individual. These merits will stand by the individual in the World to Come and may also protect his or her offspring in the future, and they thus have incredible value.⁹ Finally, argues R.

8 *Berakhot* 10a. R. Bahya ben Asher (*Kad Ha-Kemach*, “*Tefillah*”) also quotes this Talmudic source as encouraging one to pray in a case exactly like the one we have described – that of a dying patient (“*holeh noteh la-mut*”). In contrast, the author of *Minbat Hinukh* points out that the Talmud tells one not to give up hope only when the sword is on (“*al*”) his neck; it is not referring to when the sword is actually penetrating his neck (“*mamash betzavaro*”). See *Ke-Motzei Shelal Rav: U-Refuah Kerovah La-Vo*, p. 203, for this quote and pp. 203-8 for the opinions of some of those who disagree with it. The latter include R. Bentzion Rabinowitz, the Biala Rebbe, himself a descendant of *Minbat Hinukh*. The Biala Rebbe argues (*Mevaser Tov: Ma’amar Tehiyat Ha-Meitim*) that one should pray for mercy no matter how bleak the situation is, even if one’s physician has told him that there is no medical cure for his illness. He bases his opinion on the statement of Ritva (*Bava Metzia* 85b) concerning the two prayers for resurrection of the dead recited in the daily *Amidah*. Ritva writes that the first mention of resurrection alludes to the request to “revive sick people who have reached the gates of death.” Abudraham similarly comments that the prayer refers to a patient whom the “doctors consider as if dead.” The Biala Rebbe concludes that since the Sages established one prayer in the *Amidah* for the deathly ill to recover in addition to another prayer for all other ill people (*Refā’einu*), it is clearly appropriate to pray that such a critically ill patient recover.

⁹ This point seems to be based on *Sefer Hasidim* 378.

Kanievsky, these prayers can bring recovery to other individuals and to the community as a whole.¹⁰

R. Kanievsky thus concludes that one should always engage in prayer, no matter how desperate the situation seems. In the End of Days, when all will be revealed, we will learn how every prayer uttered by each individual somehow did indeed bring about great goodness and salvation.

Perhaps we can suggest that this outlook is supported by the Talmud, which quotes R. Pinchas bar Hamah's teaching: "Whoever has a sick person in his house should go to a sage and have the sage plead for mercy on his behalf."¹¹ Based on this statement, Meiri writes, "A person should always be confident that if he prays properly, it will nullify the bad decree."¹²

10 This point finds support in *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*, *Sha'ar* 2:10 (based on *Zohar*, *Töledot* 137a), which states that God desires prayers because they increase holiness and Godly influence in the world, benefitting all those in need of that prayer. I thank R. Yaakov Siegel for bringing this source to my attention.

11 *Bava Batra* 116a.

12 Meiri, *Bava Batra* 116a s.v. "*La'olam*." Similarly, the statement in *Rosh Hashanah* 18a that prayer said after the determination of a divine decree cannot be answered (see n. 2 above) also records an opinion that although "*tefillah*" (prayer) said too late cannot be answered, "crying out in prayer (*tza'akah*) is beneficial for a person both before and after a decree is issued." See also *Berakhot* 32b: "Although the gates of prayer have been locked, the gates of tears have not been locked, as it says, 'Hear my prayer, God, give ear to my outcry; to my tears be not silent.'" Similarly, the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Ta'anit* 8b) states: "Three things cancel a bad decree (*mevatlin et ha-gezeirah kashah*) – prayer, charity, and repentance." Moreover, the *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Vayeitzei* 8) quotes the *mishnah* in *Berakhot* that crying out over an occurrence that has passed constitutes uttering a prayer in vain, but contends that "even until the moment a woman is giving birth, one may still pray about the gender of the child, for it is not difficult for God to transform females into males or males into females." *Bereishit Rabbah* (*Vayeitzei* 6) also quotes this idea in the context of the claim of the Targum Yonatan ben Uziel (*Bereishit* 29:22) that Dina was originally conceived in Rachel's womb but God transferred her to Leah's womb because Rachel prayed to give birth to Yosef instead. See also Rabbeinu Bechayei (*Devarim* 11:13): "The strength of prayer is so great that it can even change nature and save a person from danger, nullifying a decree." For a summary of perspectives

Indeed, R. Kanievsky points out elsewhere that one is not only encouraged to pray in such circumstances, but this is the ideal time to pray. Although reciting daily prayers is a rabbinic enactment according to most opinions, prayer during an “*eit tzarah*” (a time of distress) is obligated by the Torah.¹³

What about R. Auerbach’s concern that this falls under the prohibition against praying for a miracle? R. Kanievsky quotes *Hazon Ish* (his brother-in-law), who was asked this precise question. *Hazon Ish* responded that he knew of a rabbi who was told by his physicians that he would live only a short while longer, but who then went on to live another thirty years. Sometimes, despite a dire prognosis, a person can indeed live much longer. We are thus not praying for a miracle, but simply that the doctors are wrong.¹⁴

This approach maintains the crucial value of hope and affirms that there are often ways of finding optimism and courage even in the bleakest of situations. According to this worldview, it was certainly appropriate for me to engage in prayer with the patient’s father. Although the father did not perceive that these prayers were answered, we are called upon to maintain faith that the prayers did have some impact, even if it is beyond us to know exactly how.

on how some heartfelt prayers nevertheless appear to go unanswered, see R. Yehuda Turetsky, “Prayer and the Terminally Ill Patient,” 142-4.

13 *Peninei Rabbeinu Ba'al Ha-Kehillat Yaakov*, vol. 1, p. 118.

14 *Sefer Toledot Yaakov*, p. 118. Similarly, *Nishmat Avraham, Yoreh De'ah* 338:1(4) quotes R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook (*Da'at Kohen* 140) as claiming that most terminal predictions made by doctors cannot be considered certainties (“*torat vada'i*”), but must be categorized as only possibly true (“*anu mahzikim rak le-safek*”).

Another approach, offered by R. Yaakov Kaminetsky, is that since prayer for a terminally ill person to be cured is a forbidden prayer for a miracle, “rather than praying that the patient be miraculously cured, one should pray that a cure be found for the disease;” see Yonasan Rosenblum, *Reb Yaakov* (Mesorah Publications, 1993), 368. Such a prayer would be permitted, as it does not beseech God to alter the natural order, but assumes the cure must already exist in nature and is just waiting to be discovered. I thank R. Yaakov Siegel for bringing this source to my attention.

III. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik

An entirely different perspective on this issue was offered by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In the Rav's view, the goal of prayer is not receiving God's sympathetic answers to our requests, but rather to develop a supportive relationship between a human being and God:

When man is in need and prays, God listens. One of God's attributes is *shomea tefillah*: "He who listens to prayer." Let us note that Judaism has never promised that God accepts all prayer. The efficacy of prayer is not the central term of inquiry in our philosophy of *avodah she-ba-lev*. Acceptance of prayer is a hope, a vision, a wish, a petition, but not a principle or a premise. The foundation of prayer is not the conviction of its effectiveness but the belief that through it we approach God intimately and the miraculous community embracing finite man and his Creator is born. The basic function of prayer is not its practical consequences but the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of God and man.¹⁵

Similarly, the Rav summarizes his view as follows:

We have the assurance that God is indeed a *shomea tefillah*, One who **hears** our prayers, but not necessarily that He is a *mekabel tefillah*, One who **accepts** our prayers and accedes to our specific requests. It is our persistent hope that our requests will be fulfilled, but it is not our primary motivation for prayer. In praying, we do not seek a response to a particular request

15 R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* (Ktav, 2003), 35. In the same essay (p. 29), the Rav refers to prayer that is not accompanied by distress and anxiety as the only "futile" prayer.

as much as we desire a fellowship with God.¹⁶

In the view of the Rav, it is always essential to pray, even when there appears to be no chance of recovery or any hope that our prayers will be answered (although the contours of these prayers may have to be adjusted at times to avoid “prayer in vain”). The emphasis of our faith is not on God’s answer, but that God hears our prayers, which forces us to expand what we mean by prayer being “effective.” Truly effective prayer is not that which results in our desired ends, but that which brings about a change in the one offering the prayer, specifically in creating a meaningful relationship and providing true comfort. After all, the experience of being in God’s caring presence throughout our time of need can be the best possible comfort, as the *midrash* says:

It is the way of a father to have mercy, as it says, “As a father is merciful towards his children, so has the Lord shown mercy to those who fear him” (*Tehillim* 103:13). It is the way of a mother to give comfort, as it says “Like a man whose mother consoles him, so will I console you” (*Yeshayahu* 66:13). God says: “I will do that of the father; I will do that of the mother” as it says, “I, only I, am He Who comforts you” (*Yeshayahu* 51:12).¹⁷

16 Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 1 (Ktav, 1993), 78.

17 *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 19, s.v. *Anochi anochi*. There are many verses in *Tanakh* that emphasize the comforting role that God can play, such as “I am with him in distress” (*Tehillim* 91:15). Similarly, *Tehillim* 147:3 describes God as “the Healer of shattered hearts” and 118:6 states, “God is with me; I have no fear.” Along these lines, *Sefat Emet* (*Va’etchanan* 5632) writes that God is close to a person to the extent that he has *kavanah* in prayer. He homiletically interprets the concept of “*semikhat geulah le-tefillah*” (the proximity of the prayer for redemption to the *Amidah* prayer) as the ability of a person to achieve personal redemption through his understanding of – and connection to – the divine, which is achieved through prayer.

Profound comfort can be experienced as a result of prayer, since it can ultimately bring us closer to God; the comfort itself is the effectiveness of prayer. According to this view, the goal of contact with the Almighty is not only to get our needs fulfilled, but also to be ennobled, to deepen our relationship with God, and to be brought to heights that we could not otherwise reach. Even if we do not receive what we prayed for, prayer that uplifts us and brings us to a closer relationship with God is certainly not uttered in vain. The value of prayer lies not in the response to our prayer from God, but rather in our response to intimately experiencing God's presence.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, the perspective of the Rav seems to find support in the thought of Rambam.¹⁹ There appears to be a contradiction within Rambam's writings regarding prayer. On the one hand, he suggests certain philosophical problems with the notion that our prayers can change God's mind. Foremost among them, God is not like humans and does not experience human emotions or change His mind.²⁰ At the same time, Rambam certainly rules that we must pray and supplicate for all of our needs.²¹ One profound resolution of these con-

18 It should be pointed out that according to the Rav, we cannot expect to achieve this connection through prayer alone, but rather through an entire Godly way of life: "Any kind of injustice, corruption, cruelty or the like desecrates the very essence of the prayer adventure... If man craves to meet God in prayer, then he must purge himself of all that separates him from God. The Halakhah has never looked upon prayer as a separate magical gesture in which man may engage without integrating it into the total pattern of his life..." (*The Lonely Man of Faith*, 65).

19 It should be noted that the Rav's view of prayer as "worship of the heart" (*avodah she-ba-lev*) is motivated by his halakhic/existential perspective; the Rav's concern tends to be with human religious consciousness as we direct ourselves to God. Rambam's view, on the other hand, is a more philosophical/theological consideration, focusing on the world as seen from God's vantage point. I thank Professor Lawrence Kaplan for pointing out this distinction.

20 *The Guide of the Perplexed* 1:36, 56; *Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:11-12.

21 Commentary to the Mishnah, *Berakhot* 4:2; *Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:2, 8:1; *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 7:7; *Hilkhot Ma'anos Le-Evyonim* 10:16; *Hilkhot Ta'anot* 1:3-4.

cepts is based on the way that Rambam categorizes the *mitzvah* of prayer, placing prayer among the “actions prescribed to remind us continually of God and of our duty to fear and to love Him, to keep all His commandments, and to believe concerning God that which every religious person must believe.”²² Based on this and Rambam’s ruling that during prayer one must view himself as though he were literally standing before the Divine presence,²³ some maintain that Rambam does affirm the import of petitionary prayer, but it can be conceptualized as follows:

Just as the Temple code with its laws of purity is intended to create an awe of the Divine presence, so is prayer of supplication intended to sustain a loving awareness of the presence of God, rather than to satisfy a human need. Prayer presents the humanity of the worshiper – including its needfulness that is expressed in petition – before God, but it is not intended as means to satisfy those needs...²⁴

Kiryat Sefer, one of the commentators on Rambam, explains in the same spirit:

A person should not consider that the primary purpose of prayer is to have his requests answered. This principle is found in *Berakhot* 32b that a person who expects to have his prayers

22 *The Guide of the Perplexed* 3:44.

23 *Hilkhot Tefillah* 4:16. The Rav similarly defines prayer as “an awareness of man finding himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, and to pray has one connotation only: to stand before God” (*The Lonely Man of Faith*, 35).

24 Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart* (SUNY Press, 1995), 85. This is not to say that God cannot or does not respond to prayer according to Rambam, but simply that the **intention** of prayer is the awareness of God’s presence, not God’s answer.

answered will simply end up heartbroken and that one whose prayers are not answered should keep trying... The purpose of prayer is to show that there is no one other than God to whom to pray and one should realize that he is inherently lacking in this world and only God can rectify the awareness of reality... We want to acknowledge that we are lacking many things, which we mention in prayer before Him to show that there is no one who can fulfill our needs and to save us from our suffering except for God... God does what is good in His eyes as to whether to accept our prayers if they are appropriate or not.²⁵

The essence of prayer is thus the sense of accessibility, that we can turn to God and develop the crucial comforting experience of being in God's presence. This does not deny the possibility of Divine acceptance of prayers, but it does view prayer primarily as a mode of worship that inculcates essential beliefs and emotions in the worshiper. This perception recognizes the crucial need for hope within the realistic limits of expectations, encouraging us to maintain faith as we refocus our expectations on something more attainable and possibly even more crucial.

As individuals offering support to patients and their families in a clinical setting, our job is not only to pray for whatever people want, but also to facilitate the deepest spiritual healing possible for those individuals in order to enable them to deal with adversity. After all, even if we pray for an unlikely outcome and the patient miraculously recovers, that miracle

25 R. Moshe DiTrani, *Beit Elokim, Sha'ar Ha-Tefillah*, 2. Variations of this theme are found in many works. For example, R. Shlomo Breuer (*Hokhmah U-Mussar*, vol. 1, p. 110) asks why we have to ask God for what we need if it would be given to us by God in any event if it is in fact necessary. R. Breuer explains that the primary purpose of prayer is clearly for us to be reminded of our dependence on God.

will necessarily be impermanent; life is fraught with suffering and everyone eventually dies. According to this view, it was indeed highly appropriate to pray with the anxious father of the critical patient, but imperative to couch the focus of those prayers in a desire for God's proximity and support during those trying times and the difficult days ahead, more than in specific pleas for a miraculous recovery.

Conclusion

We have seen three very different, although related, approaches to prayer in bleak circumstances. Each works for different people at different times. The position of R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach is an important reminder that there may be limits to what it is appropriate to pray for and that we must be sensitive to the ramifications of "unanswered prayers" for many individuals. On the other hand, the Steipler's points serve as a powerful reminder that we can always turn to prayer in times of need and that we must think more broadly about the unfathomable ways in which the Almighty might, in fact, respond to our heartfelt prayers. The Rav offers a nuanced middle approach that affirms the efficacy of prayer and the necessity to pray during trying and seemingly impossible circumstances, while encouraging us to re-conceive the ultimate multifaceted impact of our prayers.

Every individual must develop a philosophy of life and prayer – ideally well before a critical situation arises²⁶ – that can be integrated into his life and help inoculate him against total despair. It is my fervent prayer that one or all of the approaches presented here will help others strike a balance between maintaining hope and managing appropriate expectations under trying circumstances.

26 R. Shlomo Breuer (*Hokhmah U-Mussar*, vol. 2, p. 1) makes the point that prayer is meant to inculcate trust in God's omnipotence and compassion, which should optimally be done before a crisis, not in the midst of one, based on the Talmudic statement (*Sanhedrin* 44b), "One should always offer prayers in advance of trouble (*le-olam yakdim adam tefillah le-tzarah*)."