

# PRAYER AS MENTAL WELLNESS

## Introduction

Prayer is an essential aspect of religious experience. But while hundreds of thousands of people around the world practice daily prayer, they don't always fully appreciate the ways prayer, at least Jewish prayer, can actually help to nurture our mental health and wellness with its proscribed routines and ways of thinking that can act as self-care.

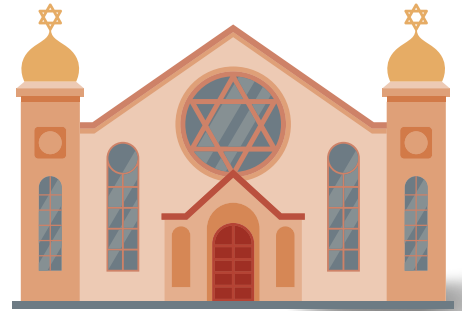
The National Wellness Institute promotes the use of the “Six Dimensions of Wellness”. Addressing these dimensions — occupational, emotional, spiritual, social, intellectual and physical — “builds a holistic sense of wellness,” which in turn helps “build resilience and enable us to thrive amidst life's challenges.” Arguably, Judaism's conception and implementation of prayer meets the spiritual, emotional and social dimensions of wellness. Each dimension has its own goals.



# PRAYER AS MENTAL WELLNESS

## Social wellness follows these tenets:

- It is better to contribute to the common welfare of our community than to think only of ourselves.
- It is better to live in harmony with others and our environment than to live in conflict with them.



Jewish prayers accomplish our need to live in harmony with others and regularly think of ourselves as being a part of a community with its choreography and liturgy. If you examine Jewish liturgy, you will discover that almost all prayers are written in the plural. The standard opening of all Jewish blessings refers to “our G-d” who has sanctified “us” with the commandments, and perhaps the most famous of all Jewish prayers, the Shema, declares that “our G-d” is one. The reason for this can be found as early as a discussion in the Talmud about how to formulate the travelers prayer (Tefillat HaDerech):

***Abaye said: At all times a person should associate himself with the congregation and should not pray for himself alone. (Talmud Brachot 30a)***



This, in addition to the fact that traditional Jewish practice emphasizes that all prayer should be chanted in a group of 10 individuals, perfectly satisfies the social dimension of wellness.



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## Emotional wellness follows these tenets:

- It is better to be aware of and accept our feelings than to deny them.
- It is better to be optimistic in our approach to life than pessimistic



One of the great religious thinkers of the 19th century, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch wrote:

*Hitpallel, from which “tefillah” (prayer in Hebrew) is derived, originally meant to deliver an opinion about oneself, to judge oneself or an inner attempt at so doing...it denotes to step out of active life to attempt to gain a true judgment of one’s relationship to G-d and the world, and the world to oneself. (Horeb Part IV)*



Through an examination of the Hebrew word for prayer, we recognize that prayer is not only supplication but also reflection and introspection. When we pray, we should be thinking about what we are saying, coming to a deeper understanding of ourselves and leaving the prayer experience changed and improved, living the emotional dimension of wellness.



# PRAYER AS MENTAL WELLNESS

## Spiritual wellness follows these tenets:

- It is better to ponder the meaning of life for ourselves and to be tolerant of the beliefs of others than to close our minds and become intolerant.
- It is better to live each day in a way that is consistent with our values and beliefs than to do otherwise and feel untrue to ourselves.

The spiritual dimension of wellness necessitates creating moments and environments to “ponder the meaning of life for ourselves” and align our internal worlds with our external worlds and live our most authentic and fulfilling lives. This goal can be seen as being addressed within the daily recitation of the Shema in the morning and evening, as it seeks to promote a sense of self-awareness and individuality in Jewish thought.

*You shall love the LORD your God  
with all your heart and with all  
your soul*



וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ  
וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ

Over the centuries, Jewish commentators have had a lot to say about the Shema, but a central theme of this line is that we are tasked with bringing all of ourselves to the table in the way we serve G-d and the impact we make on the world at large. That is the mindset with which we are supposed to start and end each day. Prayer in Jewish thought is both supplication and reflection. In reciting this prayer, we are SAYING we will bring all of ourselves to the table, but we should be THINKING about what that means for us as well. In promising G-d we will bring all of ourselves to our service of G-d and the world, we should also be asking ourselves what those special, unique things are that we bring to the table and hopefully living our lives according to that most authentic and true version of ourselves. At the beginning and ends of our days, and perhaps even our lives, the Torah and the Shema want us to ensure we are making the most of our unique talents and abilities.

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## Conclusion

When framed properly, prayer is so much more than a collection of supplications. Rather, it is a carefully composed method of imbuing our lives with values and ideas that can fill our days with spirituality and mental wellness. Finally, Judaism's prescribed schedule of prayers (three times each day) allows for a well-balanced opportunity to focus on all three dimensions of wellness each day; once in the morning (Shacharit), once in the afternoon (Mincha) and once in the evening (Maariv).

With these perspectives in mind, why not do as many Jews have done over the centuries and compose your own prayer with these core facets in mind? Jews have a rich history of composing prayers, particularly in the form of a *mi sheberach* – a prayer that addresses prominent spiritual and physical needs plaguing both individuals and communities at large. Most recently, prayers have been composed to address and acknowledge the growing issues of mental illness and substance abuse in the Jewish community.

Before you write your prayer, think deeply about those issues and/or concerns within you and your community with which you align most, and write it in the plural. Then, create a practice of reciting it regularly, placing yourself within your community and praying to G-d that you shall be alleviated speedily within your days.



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We believe Jewish prayers and rituals can help to strengthen our mental well-being, resilience and recovery in the same way [middot](#), or Jewish values, can promote them. Faith is an important part of healing for many, and Jewish thinkers and leaders historically have brought the two together.

When someone is ill or recovering from illness or an accident, we often recite a *mi sheberach* to wish them a [refuah sheleimah](#), or a “full recovery.” We have expanded this prayer for those who are struggling with mental health in different variations of *mi sheberachs*.

מי שברך אבותינו אשר קרא לנו ישראל שנאמר שרית עם אלהים, הוא יברך וירפא את אלו מבינינו הנאבקים ברוחה הנפשית. יהי רצון שיפירו בכוחם ובחסנם, ויתחסו לעצמם בסליחה ובסבלנות, וימצאו עזרה, חמלה ומשאבים בעת צרתם. הקדוש ברוך הוא יעניק לאלו מאתנו שאינם חווים קשים נפשים את הכח, החסן והיכלת להקשיב ללא שפוט ומתוך כוונה, ואת היכלת להבחין כאשר אחרים נאבקים. יהי רצונך שנצור קהלות שמקבלות, מרוממות ותומכות באלה שבינינו הנאבקים. השתא בעגלא ובזמן קריב. ונאמר אמן.

**May the One who blessed our ancestors and named us Israel bless and heal those among us who struggle with mental well-being. May they acknowledge their own strength and resilience, treat themselves with forgiveness and patience, and find help, compassion, and resources when they need them. And, may the Holy One grant those of us who aren't experiencing mental health issues the strength, resilience and capacity to listen without judgment and with intention, and the ability to notice when others are struggling. May we create communities that accept, uplift, and support those among us who are struggling. Now, speedily, and in a time soon to come. Amen.**



**Title:**

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