

[Prayer and Happiness: a blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel](#)

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The Talmud (Berakhot 31a) provides guidelines for how we are to approach prayer: “Our sages taught: One must not stand in prayer in sadness or in laziness, or in laughter, or in conversation, or in light-headedness, or in idle matters; but [one should pray] in happiness [of a mitzvah].”

Sadness: This does not only refer to feeling sad about some unfortunate situation. It also refers to feeling sad about having to pray! For some, prayer is an unpleasant burden. They come to services because they feel they have to show up. They don’t follow or understand or concentrate on the prayers. They find the service boring.

Laziness: This does not only refer to feeling drowsy during prayers. It also refers to a lazy attitude toward prayer. Instead of being energized or engaged emotionally in the prayers, some people do not invest their spirits in the service. They are passive, and simply watch quietly as the service proceeds.

Laughter: This does not only refer to silly laughter and foolish jokes. It also refers to a cynical attitude that sees the synagogue as a sort of amusement hall. Some people forget they are in the presence of God, and that solemnity and decorum are appropriate for a sacred space. Instead, they want entertainment, they want to laugh.

Conversation: This does not only refer to quiet conversation with fellow congregants. It also refers to “internal chatter” within a person’s own mind. Instead of being focused on the prayers, some people let their minds dwell on business, on what people are wearing, on the latest sports scores.

Light-headedness: This does not only refer to frivolity. It also refers to a disdainful attitude to prayer. Some people treat the synagogue as they would treat a sports arena. They lack gravitas, the elemental ingredient for actual prayer.

Idle Matters: This does not only refer to secular topics. It also refers to keeping one’s mind off the topic of prayer. Instead of devotional prayer, some people read books or newspapers.

Happiness: The proper approach to prayer is happiness. This does not refer to silliness or a feeling of self-contentment. Rather, it refers to a tremendous optimism and joy at the privilege of being able to address the Master of the Universe. If one understands the awesome nature of prayer, one is filled with an ineffable happiness, a feeling of being at one with the One. This happiness cannot be artificially manufactured; it has to arise from an authentic spiritual longing. Such happiness is a blessing not reserved for an elite few, but a blessing to which all sincere souls can have access. But it requires thoughtfulness, solemnity, gravitas, concentration, elimination of extraneous impediments.

Happiness of a Mitzvah: Some texts add the words “of a Mitzvah” to the quality of happiness. This means that one should not see prayer as an end in itself, but as a means to living a finer, kinder and more thoughtful life. By linking our prayers to the performance of Mitzvot, we thereby indicate that our spirituality is not only a matter between us and God, but is also a matter between us and our fellow human beings. A rude, dishonest, hypocritical person does not achieve proper prayer, no matter how much he or she concentrates on the prayers. Our prophets have taught that the Almighty is repelled by the prayers of those who are immoral and unrighteous, but who pretend to be pious. The Happiness of a Mitzvah is a reminder that we must clean our own slates as we come before God in prayer, that we must sincerely and honestly do our best to stand before the Almighty with clean hands and pure heart.

Some people walk out of synagogue after services, and they are the same person as they were when they entered the synagogue. These people have missed a grand opportunity. Some people walk out of synagogue after services and they feel transformed, elevated, happy. These are the ones who have understood the privilege of prayer, and who have let their souls soar to a higher level. May we all merit to pray with genuine Happiness, with the Happiness of a Mitzvah.

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