



Rosh Hashanah

A Year That Doesn't Exist

Why Desperation Makes Prayer More Powerful

HOLIDAY OVERVIEW

Rosh Hashanah

The festival of Rosh Hashanah—which means “Head of the Year”—is observed for two days, beginning on 1 Tishrei, the first day of the Jewish year. It is the anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, and their first actions toward the realization of humankind’s role in G-d’s world.

Rosh Hashanah thus emphasizes the special relationship between G-d and humanity: our dependence upon G-d as our Creator and Sustainer, and G-d’s

“dependence” upon us as the ones who make His presence known and felt in His world. Each year on Rosh Hashanah, “all inhabitants of the world pass before G-d like a flock of sheep,” and it is decreed in the Heavenly court “who shall live, and who shall die; . . . who shall be impoverished, and who shall be enriched; who shall fall and who shall rise.” But this is also the day we proclaim G-d King of the universe. The kabbalists teach that the continued existence of the universe is dependent upon the renewal of the Divine desire for a world when we

accept G-d’s kingship each year on Rosh Hashanah.

The central observance of Rosh Hashanah is the sounding of the shofar, the ram’s horn, which also represents the trumpet blast of a people’s coronation of their king. The cry of the shofar is also a call to repentance, for Rosh Hashanah is also the anniversary of humanity’s first sin and their repentance thereof, and it serves as the first of the “Ten Days of Repentance,” which culminate in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.



HOLIDAY OVERVIEW

Rosh Hashanah

Another significance of the shofar is to recall the Binding of Isaac, which also occurred on Rosh Hashanah, in which a ram took Isaac's place as an offering to G d; we evoke Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son, and we plead that the merit of his deed should stand by us as we pray for a year of life, health, and prosperity. Altogether we listen to one hundred shofar blasts over the course of the Rosh Hashanah services.

Additional Rosh Hashanah observances include: a) eating a piece of apple dipped in honey to symbolize our desire for a

sweet year, and eating other special foods symbolic of the new year's blessings; b) blessing one another with the words "Leshanah tovah tikatevu vetechatemu—May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year"; and c) *Tashlich*, a special prayer said near a body of water (an ocean, river, pond, etc.), in evocation of the verse, "And You shall cast their sins into the depths of the sea." And, as with most major Jewish holidays, after candle lighting and prayers, we recite Kiddush and make a blessing on chalah to begin the festive Rosh Hashanah meals.

Our sages teach that even when all seems hopeless, we must not despair because G-d's power is greater than nature or chance.



TEXT 1

Talmud, Berachot 10A

אֲפִילוּ חֶרֶב חֲדָה מוֹנַחַת עַל צְוֵארוֹ שֶׁל
אָדָם אֵל יִמְנַע עֲצָמוֹ מִן הַרְחָמִים.

Even if a sharp knife lies upon one's neck,
don't hold back from praying for mercy.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What is the point of prayer under such circumstances?



QUESTION

On Rosh Hashanah we read about the births of holy figures, why specifically on this day?

ANSWER

Because Rosh Hashanah is a time of rebirth and new beginnings, and it is also the day when the heartfelt prayers of righteous mothers were answered.

TEXT 2A

Talmud, Rosh
Hashanah 11a

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה נִפְקְדָה שָׂרָה רָחֵל
וְחַנָּה.

On Rosh Hashanah, Sarah, Rachel, and
Hannah were remembered.

TEXT 2B

Rabbi Moshe Sofer,
Chatam Sofer on
Magen Avraham,
Orach Chayim 581:15

לְפִי הַמְּפֹרָסִים דִּתְפִּילַת חֲנָה הָיָה בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה . . .
וְעַל כָּרְחֹךְ הַפְּקִידָה, הָיִינוּ שֹׁנְגִזֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם שְׁתַּעֲבֹר
וּתְלֹד, וְלֹא הַהֲרִיוֹן.

According to a well-known tradition, Hannah prayed for a child on Rosh Hashanah. . . . This means that the Talmud's phrase "Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah were remembered" [on Rosh Hashanah] does not mean that they conceived on Rosh Hashanah. It means that G-d decreed on Rosh Hashanah that they would conceive and give birth that year.



On Rosh Hashanah we read about Hannah to show that just as G-d answered her heartfelt prayer, He will answer ours too.

TEXT 3

Rabbi Shmuel
Schneersohn, *Sefer
Hamaamarim* 5626, p.
133

ענין התפלה הוא "יהי רצון", להמשיך רצון חדש לגמרי, שיתרפא החולי וכדומה.

הינו, הגם כי נגזר עליו רחמנא לצלן, עם כל זה, על ידי התפלה פועלים שיומשך רצון חדש לגמרי. ואם כן, נמשך על ידי התפלה דבר חדש לגמרי מה שלא נמצא תחלה גם בשרשו ומקורו גם כן. כי בשרשו נגזר תחלה להיפך, ועל ידי התפלה עושים רצון חדש לגמרי.

The idea behind prayer is [as we commonly say in our prayers], "May it be His will," namely to draw down an entirely new will, to heal the sick, etc.

Though G-d decreed [the patient's illness], prayer can nevertheless elicit an entirely new will from G-d. This means that prayer can create something that did not exist at the source. The decree [of illness] originated in the source, yet our prayers create an entirely new desire within G-d.



Prayer isn't just asking G-d to change our situation, it's asking Him to change His will, showing that prayer has the power to bring about even Divine change.

TEXT 4

Mishnah, Avot 2:4

הוא הָיָה אומר: עֲשֵׂה רְצוֹנוֹ כְּרְצוֹנְךָ, כְּדִי
שֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂה רְצוֹנְךָ כְּרְצוֹנוֹ.

Rabbi Gamliel would say, "Make His desire
your desire, so that He would make your
desire His desire."

TEXT 5

Rabbi Moshe of Trani,
Beit Elokim, Gates of
Prayer, ch. 3

הַתַּפִּלָּה אֵינָה מִצְוָה מַעֲשִׂית וְלִכֵּן צָרִיךְ לְכוּיֵן בָּהּ, כִּי עֵיקָרָהּ הִיא כְּוֹנֶנֶת הַלֵּב . . .
וְהַפְּתוּב תָּלָה אוֹתָהּ בְּכוּוֹנָה . . . כְּדִכְתִּיב: "וְלָעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶּם" (דְּבָרִים יא, יג).
וְאָמְרוּ: "אֵי זֶה הִיא עֲבוּדָה שֶׁהִיא בְּלֵב? זֶה תַּפִּלָּה" (תַּעֲנִית ב, ב).

וְנִקְרָאת עֲבוּדָה שֶׁיֵּשׁ בָּהּ אֵיזָה מַעֲשֶׂה, וְהוּא עֲקִימַת שְׁפָתָיו בְּתַפִּלָּתוֹ. וְלָזֶה אֵין
יוֹצֵא בְּהִרְהוּר, דְּלֹא כְּדַבּוּר דְּמִי. אֲבָל הָעֵיקָר הִיא הַכְּוֹנָה.

Prayer is not an actionable *mitzvah*, which is why it requires mindfulness, which is the main thrust of prayer. . . . The Torah conditioned prayer on mindfulness . . . as the passage states, “And to serve Him with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 11:13). Our sages explained, “What is worship of the heart? Prayer” (Talmud, Taanit 2b).

It is true that prayer also entails a small form of action—moving lips. This is why we don’t fulfill our prayer obligations by thinking the words of prayer, as thinking isn’t speech. Nevertheless, the main thrust of prayer is mindfulness.

While every *mitzvah* requires *kavanah*, most focus on the action whereas prayer is entirely about connection with G-d, making *kavanah* its very essence.



TEXT 6

Rabbi Shneur Zalman
of Liadi, *Shulchan
Aruch HaRav, Orach
Chayim* 98:1

וְצָרִיךְ שְׂרָאָה עֲצָמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ שְׂכִינָה
שְׂרוּיָה כְּנֻגְדּוֹ. וְיַעֲרֵר הַפְּנוּנָה, וְיִסֵּיר כָּל
הַמַּחְשְׁבוֹת הַטּוֹרְדוֹת אוֹתוֹ, עַד שֶׁתִּשְׁאַר
מַחְשְׁבֹתוֹ וְכוּנָתוֹ זָכָה בְּתַפְלָתוֹ.

וַיַּחֲשֹׁב כִּי אֵלּוּ הֵיךְ מְדַבֵּר לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ
בְּשֹׁר וְדָם הֵיךְ מְסַדֵּר דְּבָרָיו וּמַכְנִין בָּהֶם
יָפָה לְבַל יִכָּשֶׁל. קַל וַחֲמֹר לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ
מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא,
שְׂצָרִיךְ לְכוּן לִפְנֵי אֵף מַחְשְׁבֹתוֹ, כִּי
לִפְנֵי הַמַּחְשְׁבָה כְּדַבּוּר, כִּי כָּל
הַמַּחְשְׁבוֹת הוּא חוֹקֵר . . .

וְקֹדֶם הַתַּפְלָה יַחֲשֹׁב מִרוּמָמוֹת הָאֵל-לִ
יְתִבְרֶךְ וְשִׁפְלוּת הָאָדָם, וְיִסֵּיר כָּל
תַּעֲנוּגֵי אָדָם מִלְּבוֹ.

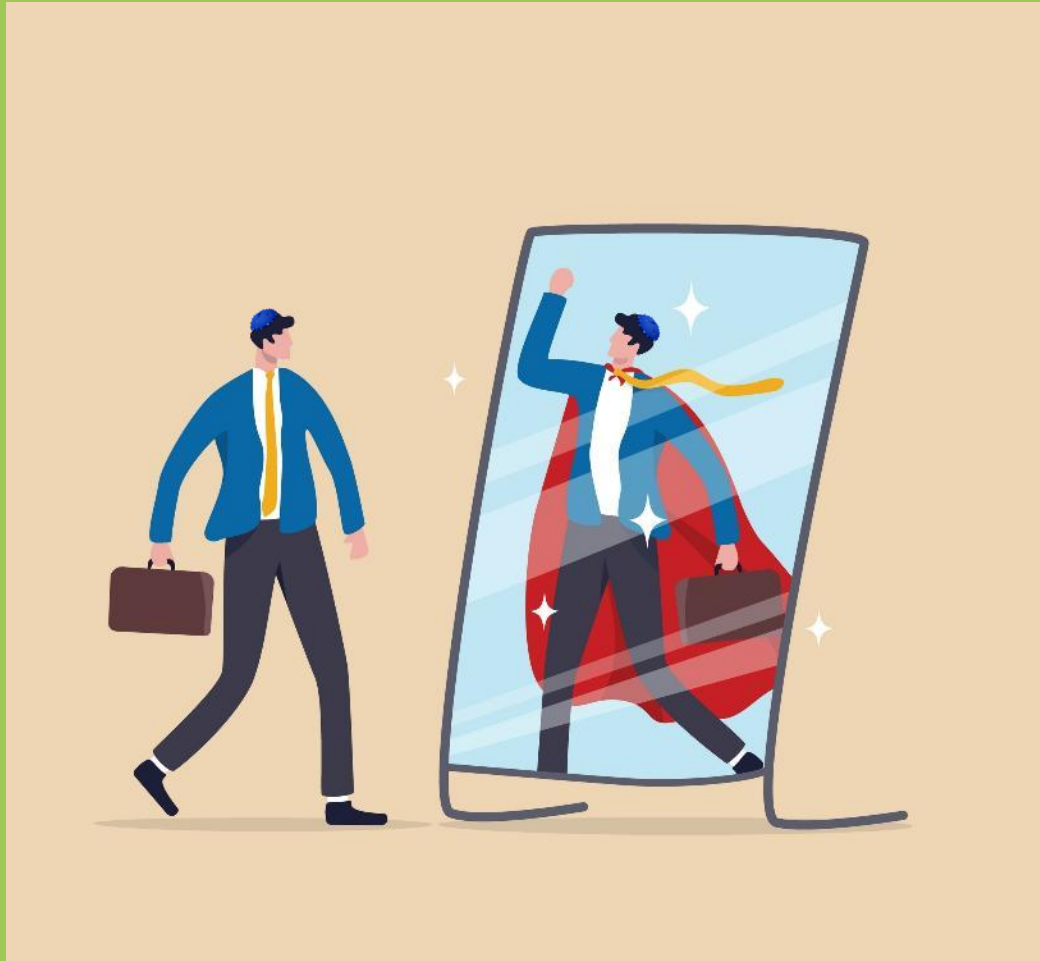
Envision yourself as if you're standing before G-d's presence. Arouse your concentration and reject every distracting thought until your thoughts and mind are pure with prayer.

Meditate on the following: If you were talking to a mortal king, you would have prepared your remarks and concentrated intensely to ensure you don't stumble. How much more important it is to direct your thoughts when standing before the King of all kings, the Holy One, blessed is He, Who examines all thoughts and for Whom thoughts are just like words. . . .

Before you begin to pray, reflect on the exaltedness of G-d, and the humility of humankind. Also, remove all thoughts of physical pleasure from your heart.

In prayer, mindfulness means being fully present with G-d, aware of His presence, and giving your complete focus and heart.





Prayer isn't about asking
G-d to change things, it's
about **changing ourselves.**

TEXT 7

Rabbi Shneur Zalman
of Liadi, *Likutei
Torah*, Bamidbar 66a

עיקר התפלה היינו בחינת צעקה בצר לו.
וזהו לפני ה' ישפוך שיחו" (תהלים קב,
א). לשון ישפוך היינו שפיכת הנפש כאשר
צר לה מאד מאשר בהכל בא ובחושך
וצלמות ילך ברוב הזמן כו'.

והיינו על ידי קדימת בחינת בואו חשבון
להיות ממארי דחושבנא בכל לילה כנזכר
לעיל. לטעום מרירות בנפשו מכל מעשיו
ודבוריו ומחשבותיו אשר לא לה' המה,
מיום היותו. ועל אשר נשקע ונטבע
בתאוות עולם הזה, ובזה כל השתדלותו
בשקבו ובקומו כו'.

והאמת נשכח מלוח לבו מחמת טרדתו
בהכלי הזמן כו'. רק כי פנו אלי עורף בלא
לב כו'. ויוסף דעת בגדולת ה' יוסף
מכאוב בנפשו.

The primary objective of prayer is to cry out in distress.
This is the meaning of the passage, "Before G-d, he spills
his speech" (Psalms 102:1). To spill refers to pouring out
our souls from deep distress over the vanity and
darkness that we pursue most of our lives.

Prayer must begin with a proper accounting of our souls
each night: to feel bitter over the many inappropriate
actions, words, and thoughts of our past; to regret
sinking and drowning in the pleasures of this world; and
to feel remorseful that it is all we seek from morning to
night.

Even when we turned to G-d, it was perfunctory and
insincere. The more we reflect on G-d's greatness, the
more distressed we are by our situation; [and] the sorrier
we feel for having allowed this truth to be forgotten
from the panels of our hearts, because we were too busy
with the vanity of the times.

TEXT 7

Rabbi Shneur Zalman
of Liadi, *Likutei*
Torah, Bamidbar 66a

וְעַל יְדֵי זֶה יִשְׁפּוּךְ שִׁיחוֹ בְּמִסִּירַת נֶפֶשׁ,
מֵעוֹמָקָא דְּלִיבָא, לְהִיּוֹת בְּחִינַת הַסָּחָה
וְהַזְנָה מִמֶּשׁ. שְׂיִהְיֶה נִעְתָק וְנִבְדָּל מִמַּדּוּתוֹ
הַבְּהִמִיּוֹת הַמְּסֻתָּרִים כו'.

Filled with genuine contrition, our words of prayer spill from the depths of our hearts in a way that provokes genuine change: a complete disengagement from all indulgent inclinations that prevent us from sensing the Divine presence.

If we ask G-d to change
His will, we must first
remake ourselves and
become worthy of it.





When we ask G-d for something that overturns nature, we must completely pour ourselves into prayer and personal transformation as Hannah did when she prayed for a righteous child.

TEXT 8

I Samuel 1:11

וַתִּזְכֹּר נָדָר וַתֹּאמֶר, ה' צְבָאוֹת, אִם רָאָה תִּרְאֶה בְּעֵינַי
אֲמַתְךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֲמַתְךָ, וְנִתְּתָה לְאֲמַתְךָ
זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים, וְנִתְּתִיו לַה' כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּיו, וּמִזְבֵּחַ לֹא יֵעָלֶה
עָלָיו רֶאֱשׁוֹ.

And she vowed. "G-d, if You see the affliction of Your servant, and remember me and do not forget me, and give me a male child, I will give him to G-d all the days of his life, and no razor will come upon his head."

TEXT 9A

Talmud, Nidah 16b

אותו מלאך הממונה על ההריון "לילה" שמו.

ונוטל טפה ומעמידה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואומר לפניו, "רבוננו של עולם, טפה זו מה תהא עליה? גבור או חלש? חכם או טיפש? עשיר או עני? ואילו רשע או צדיק לא קאמר, כדברי חנינא.

דאמר רבי חנינא: הכל בידי שמים, חוץ מיראת שמים

The angel in charge of human conception is called Laylah.

This angel presents the zygote to G-d and asks, "Master of the universe, what will be the fate of this zygote? Will it be strong or weak? Wise or foolish? Wealthy or poor? However, in accordance with the teaching of Rabbi Chanina, the angel does not ask if it will be righteous or wicked.

For Rabbi Chanina taught, "Everything is in the hands of G-d except fear of G-d."



G-d decides our life situation, but He gives us the choice of whether to fear and serve Him.

TEXT 9B

Maimonides, *Mishneh
Torah*, Laws of
Repentance 5:3

וְדָבָר זֶה עֶקֶר גָּדוֹל הוּא וְהוּא עֲמוּד הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוָה
... שֶׁהָרִשּׁוּת בְּיָדְכֶם וְכָל שִׁיחַפֵּץ הָאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת
מִמַּעֲשֵׂה בְנֵי הָאָדָם עוֹשָׂה, בֵּין טוֹבִים בֵּין רָעִים.

This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar of the Torah and the commandments . . . the choice is in our hands. We can choose to do anything, whether good or bad.

Our ability to choose is a core part of Judaism, and Hannah's prayer for a righteous child was extraordinary because it asked G-d to overrule his principle of free will.



TEXT 10

I Samuel 1:10, 15

י. וְהָיָא מָרַת נַפְשׁ וּתְתַפְּלָל עַל ה' וּבָכָה תְּבָכָה . . .
טו. אִשָּׁה קָשֶׁת רוּחַ אָנֹכִי . . . וְאֶשְׂפַךְ אֶת נַפְשִׁי לִפְנֵי
ה'.

10. And she was bitter in spirit, and she prayed to G-d,
and wept. . . .

15. I am a woman with a broken spirit. . . . And I poured
my soul into my prayer.



Hannah confidently vowed her son would be a lifelong ***nazir*** (Nazirite) and poured her whole being into her prayer, achieving her request through her complete devotion.

TEXT 11

Rabbi Shneur Zalman
of Liadi, *Igeret*
Hakodesh 14

אור כל שנה וְשנה מסתלק לְאֶשְׁרֵנוּ בְּכָל עֶרֶב ראש־השָׁנָה . . .
ואחר כך, על ידי תְּקִיעַת שׁוֹפָר וְהִתְפָּלוֹת, נִמְשָׁךְ אור תְּדַשׁ עֲלִיוֹן
מִבְּחִינָה עֲלִיוֹנָה יוֹתֵר שְׁבַמְדִּרְגַת חֲכָמָה עִלְאָה, לְהָאִיר לְאָרֶץ
עֲלִיוֹנָה וְלִדְרִים עֲלֶיהָ. הֵם כָּל הָעוֹלָמוֹת הָעֲלִיוֹנִים וְהַתְּחִתּוֹנִים
הַמְּקַבְּלִים חַיּוּתָם מִמֶּנָּה.

The Divine light [that creates time, space, and existence] reverts to its origin every year on the last day of the year. . . .

The next day, our shofar sounding and prayers elicit a much higher Divine light from a much higher Divine light to create the world and its inhabitants. “World” here means all celestial and terrestrial worlds, all of which receive their vitality from this light.

On Rosh Hashanah, we
pray not to improve the
year, but to ask G-d to
create the future itself,
bringing into existence
what does not yet exist.



TEXT 12

The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson,
Likutei Sichot 29, p. 188

מִצְוַת הַיּוֹם בְּשׁוֹפָר וּנְיִיל דּוֹקָא תְּקִיעַת שׁוֹפָר
אֲנִשְׁתַּהֲלֵט אֵין זִיד דְּעַם תּוֹכֵן וְנָאס עָס טוֹט אוֹיף
דָּער עֲגֵל פֿון "תְּמַלִּיכוּנִי". ווי די גְּמָרָא זָאגט
"אֲמָרוּ לְפָנַי בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה מַלְכִּיּוֹת . . כְּדִי
שְׁתַּמְּלִיכוּנִי עַלְיֶכֶם, זְכוּרֹנוֹת כּו' וּבִמָּה בְּשׁוֹפָר"
(רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לֵד, ב):

דָּער קול שׁוֹפָר אִיז אַ קול פֿשוט, וְנָאס קוֹמֵט פֿון
הֶבֶל הַלֵּב. וְנָאס בַּעֲבוּדַת ה' אִיז עָס די צִעֲקָה
פֿשוט פֿון אַן אִידן פֿון פְּנִימִיּוֹת הַלֵּב, כְּמוֹ
נִשְׁכָּתוֹב, "צִעַק לִבָּם אֶל ה'" (אֵיכָה ב, יח). די
צִעֲקָה פְּנִימִית פֿון אִידן צוֹם אוֹיְבֵעֲרִשְׁטֵן.

און דָּערפֿאַר אִיז דָּאס מְעוֹרָר לְמַעַלָּה אַ רְצוֹן
פְּנִימִי לְמִלּוּכָה. אַז דָּער אוֹיְבֵעֲרִשְׁטֵער זָאל
אָנְנֵעֲמֵען די הַכְּתָרָה פֿון די אִידן און זײַן מֶלֶךְ
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל יְדֵי זֶה, דָּער מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. בִּיז עָס
וְנִעֲרַט בְּגָלוּי, "וְהָיָה ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם
הַהוּא יְהִיָּה ה' אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד" (זְכַרְיָה יד, ט).

The *mitzvah* of the day is to sound the shofar because only the shofar can prevail upon G-d to be our king. As the Talmud states, "On Rosh Hashanah, pray to me for kingship . . . so you can coronate me as your king . . . and how? Through the sounds of the shofar" (Rosh Hashanah 34b).

The shofar produces a plain sound that bursts from the depths of the heart. It represents the elemental cry of a Jew's inner being, as the passage states, "Their hearts cried out to G-d" (Lamentations 2:18). The Jew pines for G-d.

This deep, authentic cry arouses a deep desire within G-d to be our king. G-d accepts our coronation and consents to be our king, and through us, King of the world. [This will continue to progress] until we will openly experience the promise of the prophets, "And G-d will be the king of the entire earth: on that day, G-d will be One and His name will be One" (Zechariah 14:9).



We read Hannah story to inspire us to fully devote ourselves to prayer, preparing for the immense task of asking G-d to create the new year and existence itself.

ANSWER

Desperate circumstances are the perfect time for true prayer; if we pray with our entire hearts and souls, as Hannah did, we can move G-d to do the impossible and even create what does not yet exist.

KEY POINTS

1. Prayer is a request that G-d issue a new will to override His existing will.
2. To achieve this, we must be prepared to make over our will. This means turning over a new leaf and becoming G-d-fearing in both action and heart.
3. The greater the change we pray for, the greater the change we must make to earn what we seek.
4. There is nothing prayer cannot achieve so long as it comes from the depths of our hearts, is meant sincerely, and is accompanied by a complete overhaul of our values and passions.
5. This is why we pray even in the direst circumstances. When our lives depend on it, it is easier to pray with all our hearts. And this is the kind of prayer that produces results.

