

18Forty in Debate: Thoughts & Prayers



In recent years, one particular phrase has become a flash point for discontent in the wake of tragedy: Thoughts and prayers. These three words are offered by politicians and public leaders in tweets and public statements, and have increasingly provoked outpourings of response, as the world struggles with the meeting point of questions around prayer, action, faith, policy, and political leadership.

In a recent op-ed at *The Wall Street Journal*, "Thoughts and Prayers Do Help", 18Forty founder David Bashevkin comes down in favor of prayer. David asks us, "what's gained by attacking their use of prayerful language? We don't need a moratorium on prayer to stop school shootings." While David notes the potential misuse of such statements to avoid change, he ultimately argues that "this most human instinct should not be cast aside just because we are rightfully impatient with the intractability of our political ineptitude."

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Enter Yehuda Fogel. This intrepid 18Forty editor, writer, aspiring psychologist and appreciant, and author of these words, took to the streets, writing a letter to the editor at *The Wall Street Journal* to disagree with his employer, mentor, and friend. Fogel writes in favor of action, and against the “cheap palliatives” of prayerful statements.

This debate, between friends and close colleagues, speaks to a shared commitment to discussion, debate, and meaningful disagreement that goes to the very heart of 18Forty. When my letter to the editor was published, David sent me the following responsum of Rav Moshe Feinstein, from his *Iggros Moshe* (Yoreh Deah 3:88). Someone wished to give a lecture in Bnei Brak disagreeing with a stance of the Chazon Ish, Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (1878 – 1953), who was the reigning Torah sage of his time, and they asked Rav Moshe Feinstein about whether it was permissible to disagree so publicly:

Is it permitted to argue with the words of our Sages in public – even in their communities?

I really don’t understand why you are concerned. In fact the opposite is true. It is in fact showing respect to the Chazon Ish by mentioning his Torah view and examining his words – even though you don’t end up agreeing with him. It would be inconceivable to the Chazon Ish that there shouldn’t be a *talmid chochom* who disagreed with him. It is simply not possible that he would be bothered by this, and in fact the opposite is true. He loved truth and peace, as it says (Yevamos 14b) concerning the dispute between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel. In fact the idea that the deceased *talmid chochom* gets pleasure from discussion of his Torah work – is even when it is disputed. However, obviously it has to be mentioned respectfully.

This spirit of respectful and deep engagement drives us forward. We invite you to consider David’s words, as well as my own, and let us know what you think. We close with an ancient parable, one we might both be able to agree with, in the hope that we can pray and work towards a safer and better world.

Past the seeker, as he prayed, came the crippled and the beggar and the beaten. And seeing them, the holy one went down into deep prayer and cried, “Great God, how is it that a loving creator can see such things and yet do nothing about them?”

And out of the long silence, God said: “I did do something about them. I made you.”

Read David’s op-ed: “Thoughts and Prayers Do Help”

Read Yehuda’s response: “The Problem With the ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ of Politicians”