

18Forty in Debate: Thoughts & Prayers

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By Yehuda Fogel

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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.”

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"

Thoughts and Prayers Do Help

WSJ [wsj.com/articles/thoughts-and-prayers-do-help-religion-lincoln-ualde-texas-mass-shooting-policy-11654030138](https://www.wsj.com/articles/thoughts-and-prayers-do-help-religion-lincoln-ualde-texas-mass-shooting-policy-11654030138)

May 31, 2022

By
David Bashevkin

May 31, 2022 6:38 pm ET



A memorial for the victims of the Robb Elementary School mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas, May 29.

Photo: Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

Many Americans are understandably tired of prayers to end mass shootings. Familiar platitudes such as “thoughts and prayers to the families” seem hollow when offered without clear policy proposals. But the presence of prayer preserves the urgency for action and has since America’s inception.

In 1865, amid the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated to his second term as president. He delivered one of the shortest but most memorable inaugural addresses in our nation’s history. “Fondly do we hope,” he famously said, “fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.”

Lincoln of course did not stop at prayer. A little over a month later he oversaw the Confederacy's surrender to the Union army. But he couched the U.S. mission of victory in the language of prayer because those sorts of words transform a political cause into an existential need. Prayer is the language we use to express our most urgent and essential desires. I don't pray for lower gas prices; I do pray for the end of school shootings.

While it's understandable to be frustrated with those who offer such prayers, attacking them for it alienates many—of all political persuasions—who find comfort and urgency in prayerful words. Turning the important debate over the proper course of action on school shootings into an inquisition on prayer only makes it more difficult to conduct that discourse. Political conversations, particularly on emotionally fraught issues such as this one, are already eroding. Politicians must present real policy measures that will meaningfully address this crisis, but what's gained by attacking their use of prayerful language? We don't need a moratorium on prayer to stop school shootings.

At the same time, prayerful people must be careful that they don't let this sort of pessimism rob their words of earnestness. I once heard a story about a group of Jews who gathered together in Jerusalem to pray for rain during a drought. As they prayed, one child innocently looked up at everyone and asked, "How come no one brought their umbrellas?" Our prayers to end school shootings need to be serious efforts, accompanied by actions appropriate to the hope that our petitions will be answered.

Lincoln reportedly said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." The random murder of children has, once again, driven our country to its knees. And perhaps it is frustration that we again find ourselves here, with seemingly nowhere else to go, that has created a cynicism and aversion to the vulnerability that prayer represents. But this most human instinct should not be cast aside just because we are rightfully impatient with the intractability of our political ineptitude.

It's when we're forced to our knees that we need the language of prayer most. Yes, we should emphatically call out the absence of action, but prayer and its attending seriousness are part and parcel with taking action. So, fondly do I continue to hope and fervently do I continue to pray that this mighty scourge of gun violence may speedily pass away.

Mr. Bashevkin is the director of education for NCSY and the founder of 18forty, a media site exploring big Jewish questions.

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The Problem With the ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ of Politicians

WSJ [wsj.com/articles/thoughts-and-prayers-shooting-mass-school-gun-control-regulation-action-uvalde-11654295616](https://www.wsj.com/articles/thoughts-and-prayers-shooting-mass-school-gun-control-regulation-action-uvalde-11654295616)

June 6, 2022

The sea split when the Israelites marched forward, not when they prayed for a miracle to split the sea for them.

June 6, 2022 1:11 pm ET



Prayers are offered during a vigil at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Uvalde, Texas, May 28.

Photo: tannen maury/Shutterstock

In “[Thoughts and Prayers Do Help](#)” (op-ed, June 1), David Bashevkin urges us to see “prayer and its attending seriousness” as “part and parcel with taking action.” I agree that prayer may be part and parcel of taking action, but it isn’t always. My discomfort as a person of faith with politicians offering “thoughts and prayers” in the wake of school shootings isn’t because I don’t value the potency of prayer, but rather because these statements are offered as a cheap palliative by those who should be effecting meaningful change.

Rabbi Bashevkin quotes Lincoln: “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.” Perhaps this is the issue; our leaders pray, overwhelmed by a conviction that there is nothing else to do, when there is so much yet

to be done.

When the ancient Israelites were chased to the edge of the sea, it is not for nothing that God admonished Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.” The sea split when the Israelites marched forward, not when they prayed for a miracle to split the sea for them.

Yehuda Fogel

New York

Rabbi Bashevkin is right about prayer and action. As Scottish evangelist and teacher Oswald Chambers observed in his popular devotional “My Utmost for His Highest” (1924), “It is not so true that ‘prayer changes things’ as that prayer changes me and I change things.” Praying can work wonders in a person’s disposition and subsequent response.

Douglas C. Frechtling

Bethesda, Md.

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