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Teach Me, O God, a Blessing, a Prayer: An Exploration of Personal Prayer Practice Among American Reform Jews

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Demonstration Project

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Abstract

While there have been numerous studies that focus on prayer (e.g., motivations for prayer, the effects of prayer, etc.), there has been little research done on the personal prayer practices of American Reform Jews. This study adds to the literature on personal prayer by focusing on the personal prayer practices of members of a midwestern Reform synagogue. Specifically, this study looked at whether American Reform Jews turned to prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also sought to understand whether Reform Jews continue to engage in personal prayer two years later, after the severity of the crisis had passed. Results indicated that the majority of the population surveyed (74%) did engage in personal prayer at least one or two times per week during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. These months included the most intense time of the COVID crisis. The study also discovered that the majority of participants (77%) also turned to personal prayer in the six-month period from May – October 2022, a full two years after the pandemic began. Participants reported receiving numerous benefits from engaging in personal prayer; they also had an opportunity to list any obstacles they faced when engaging in prayer. The majority of participants (65%) agreed that the synagogue should help people engage with personal prayer. However, only a little over one-third of the participants indicated that they, themselves, would be interested in learning more about personal prayer.

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Table of Contents

Explaining the Need

The early 20th century Hebrew writer, Micah Joseph Berdyczewski, has written: "All things pray, all things pour forth their souls. The heavens pray, the earth prays, every creature and every living thing prays. In all life there is longing…. What are the flashes of the human mind and the storms of the human heart? They are all prayers – the outpouring of boundless longing for God" (*Mishkan Tefilah*, p. 189). Understood in this way, prayer is a part of what it means to be alive, a natural yearning to connect with a Source or Power greater than oneself, regardless of one's religious affiliation or practice.

Prayer is a part of the formal religious practice of most faiths. In Judaism, prayer is seen as an essential part of one's religious and spiritual life. We read in Pirkei Avot (1:2), "Upon three things the world stands – *Torah*, *avodah,* and *gemilut chasadim* / study, prayer, and acts of loving kindness." According to this text, prayer is foundational as one of three pillars upon which the world rests. In *Entering Jewish Prayer*, Hammer (1994) affirms this idea when he writes: "[Prayer] is an integral part of the complete religious life of a Jew…. It cannot be isolated from the rest except artificially, for it interweaves with everything else to create the harmonious whole that is Judaism" (p.3). Throughout centuries, Jewish thinkers have offered diverse understandings of why prayer holds such an important place in Jewish tradition. These reasons include but are not limited to connecting with God, connecting with community, reminding us of our aspirations, fulfilling commandments, and finding comfort and a sense of peace.

While it is true that prayer holds an important place in Jewish tradition, many American Jews have, at best, an ambiguous relationship with prayer. Rabbi Jonathan Slater (2013) writes:

> If you were to ask the Jewish person in the street if Jews prayed, you would likely be told that we do. If pressed further about what Jews do, you would likely be told that Jews

> recite the words of the *siddur*, or that they say blessings. If you pressed further, to ask if Jews pray directly to God, with their own words, outside of the synagogue or recognized ritual moment, you would likely get a negative response. "We don't do that! That's how 'they' pray". But, there is a long history of Jewish personal prayer, expressed directly to God. These are prayers of joy and thanksgiving, of sorrow and hopelessness, of need and anticipation. Some of these prayers include petitions – "please help me" – but some are simply a statement of the truth – "this is how I feel. Are You there?" Despite this history, Jewish personal prayer as spiritual practice is hardly known, and even less engaged in (or at least unreported!). (Slater, 2013)

Because of Reform Judaism's lack of adherence to strict tradition, Reform Jews may have even less of a connection to prayer, in general. The Pew Research Center's Report, *Jewish Americans in 2020*, notes that "Conservative and Reform Jews tend to be less religiously observant in traditional ways, like keeping kosher and regularly attending religious services" (2021, p. 15). Also, according to a study conducted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in forty-seven congregations across North America, Reform Jews were uncomfortable with the language of the *siddur* (prayer book), troubled by the word "God," and felt some degree of discomfort praying in community (Knobel and Schechter, 2006). There has been little research done looking at the personal prayer practices of Reform Jews in America. I have worked in a large, suburban Reform synagogue for twenty-five years where we teach children how to read the prayers from the *siddur* in preparation for their B Mitzvah ceremonies and lead adult education classes that dissect the meaning of the prayers of the *siddur*. These offerings help members participate technically in worship services and settings. However, we do not offer classes on the felt experience of prayer or lead discussions on how to develop a personal prayer

practice. Based on numerous informal conversations with colleagues across the country, this seems to be the case in most Reform communities.

Along with the fact that personal prayer is not often a topic being broached or modeled in Reform congregations, there are other stumbling blocks that members of Reform congregations encounter when it comes to personal prayer. These include, but are not limited to:

- Traditional Jewish prayers are in Hebrew and the majority of Reform congregants lack fluency in the Hebrew language
- Most liberal Jews do not believe in the omnipotent, omniscient, granting-of-wishes God that the *siddur* describes
- Prayer invites people to acknowledge their limitations and vulnerabilities, which may be uncomfortable for people raised with the American myth that we are each "self-made," independent people
- Most liberal Jews trust in science and provable facts and do not understand or believe in the efficacy of prayer, and therefore do not understand the need for prayer.

There has been significant research done in the social sciences looking at the effects of prayer in people's social and emotional lives. While not fully conclusive, many studies have demonstrated the positive role of prayer in one's life. Prayer can increase feelings of commitment to one's romantic partner (Fincham and Beach, 2014) as well as increase one's capacity for forgiveness (Vasiliauskas and McMinn, 2013). According to MuCulloch and Parks-Stamm (2020), prayer can "expand people's psychological perspective, which then improves their emotional management of personal problems." Prayer has also been shown to improve the psychological well-being of hospital patients (Hollywell and Walker, 2009), and prayer intervention has been shown to effect "significant improvement of depression and anxiety"

(Boelens, Reeves, Replogle and Koenig, 2010).

Social scientists also theorize that people seek out religion and religious practices during times of stress or insecurity. Norris and Inglehart's (2011) existential insecurity theory explains that religious beliefs and practices provide people with predictable rules and rituals that help people feel more secure during times of uncertainty. The researchers note that when people feel vulnerable to physical or societal risks they are more likely to turn toward religion and religious practices, like prayer.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of great uncertainty and fear. During the onset of the pandemic, I noticed members of my congregation suffering in at least three ways. First, people were struggling with physical illness or the threat of becoming ill. Those who did sometimes wound up on ventilators in the hospital without the ability to receive visits from loved ones or clergy. People who had other physical ailments were also negatively impacted as some treatments, surgeries, and preventative measures and doctors' visits were delayed. Some members were challenged with more severe symptoms of their mental illnesses, and many members struggled because their loved ones were ill, and they were prevented from seeing them.

Second, many older members were battling feelings of loneliness due to the imposed stay-at-home orders and the isolation that went along with social distancing. Some had already been struggling with these kinds of feelings pre-pandemic. Finally, in the early weeks of the pandemic when so little was known about the virus, COVID brought thoughts and worries of mortality to the forefront of people's minds on an almost daily basis. For some this created higher than normal feelings of anxiety and fear.

In one study that looked at religious behavior during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic researchers noted that "when facing such dramatic and life-threatening experiences,

especially in the form of sudden shocks, people tend to use coping strategies to reduce their sense of insecurity" (p. 705). They concluded that religion, and religious practices such as prayer, can work as one of these strategies.

This seemed to be the case in my congregation. Before the pandemic, we had an average of 150 people attend weekly Friday evening Shabbat services, with 50-75 people who watched services through our online streaming service. Once sheltering-at-home orders took effect in our county, Shabbat worship services moved solely online where an average of 350-400 people were watching and participating each week. Members were emailing and texting members of the clergy, thanking us for providing such meaningful prayer experiences for themselves and their families. They noted the comfort they found in listening to us lead prayers and teach about our tradition through stories and sermons. Some were members who had attended worship on a somewhat regular basis. Many were members and nonmembers who had rarely set foot in the congregation for the purposes of praying with the community. It seemed that for many, the COVID crisis created an opening for people to explore their own sense of religiosity and spirituality, including ritual practices such as Shabbat observance and prayer.

At the time of this writing, the intensity of the COVID crisis has greatly eased. Vaccines are readily available; the number of people being hospitalized for COVID has dramatically decreased; masks are no longer required on airplanes, in retail shops, or at the synagogue; and students have returned to in-person learning. Yet, people are still struggling. Through casual conversations and more formal pastoral counseling and care, I know that people continue to wrestle with illness including cancer, cardiovascular disease and a surge of individuals who are struggling with mental illness. People are still experiencing loneliness. Some are still wary of becoming ill and are experiencing high levels of anxiety about being around more than a few

other people. Others were struggling with feelings of loneliness before the pandemic and continue to do so now. The majority of members of our congregation are over 50 years old; thoughts and concerns regarding their own mortality are beginning to take up residency at the edges of some people's lives, while others are struggling to cope with these issues more directly. And for people of all ages, the IPCC's 2021 Climate Change Report which sounded a "code red for humanity," opened a window for many to reassess their understanding of our planet's and their own vulnerability and mortality, as well as their sense of religiosity and spirituality (Dein, Loewenthal, Lewis, and Pargament, 2020). As Rabbi Art Green (1992) notes, "It is not only those who believe in a simplistic version of a God who 'hears' or 'answers' who need to pray in an age like ours" (p. 14).

Based on what I observed in terms of our members' religious practices during the early days of COVID and what I am seeing now, I was curious to know whether the Covid crisis spurred members of a Reform synagogue to reassess the place of religion and spirituality in their lives. Specifically, did the COVID crisis motivate people to engage or reengage in personal prayer or in a personal prayer practice? If so, what did they gain from this practice? If not, what were the obstacles that prevented that from happening? Also, now that the urgency of the COVID crisis has passed, are people continuing to lean on, yearn for, or feel curious about personal prayer? If so, how can the synagogue be responsive in helping people develop a personal prayer practice that can bolster their spiritual self-care? Personal prayer could serve as a self-care practice for members who may be confronting illness, loneliness and/or death anxiety. Therefore, I conducted a survey exploring the following questions:

- Did the members of Congregation Shaare Emeth engage in personal prayer during the onset of the COVID crisis?

- Are they continuing to engage in personal prayer now that the urgent crisis has passed?
- If they do have a personal prayer practice, what does this practice provide them?
- Do they have a yearning for or curiosity about engaging in personal prayer or developing a personal prayer practice?
- What factors get in the way of them engaging in personal prayer or developing a personal prayer practice?

Theological Reflections and Literature Review

The Meanings of Prayer in Judaism

The Hebrew word for prayer is *tefilah*. It comes from the Hebrew root *p-l-l*, which we find in Exodus 21:22 meaning "reckoning" or "judgment", and in Genesis 48:11 where it means "to think." The infinitive form of this verb, *l'hitpalel,* is a reflexive form, meaning "to judge or reflect upon oneself." Prayer is also referred to as *avodah,* meaning "work" or "service," or *avodah shebalev*, meaning "service of the heart." Each of these definitions point to a slightly different understanding of the possible place of prayer within a person's spiritual life. Prayer as "thinking" or "judging oneself" might mean that prayer is an act of personal discernment or discovery. Prayer as "work" could imply that prayer is not necessarily easy or natural. Prayer as "service" could mean that prayer is an obligation. Prayer as a "service of the heart" implies that prayer involves something deeper or more emotional than mere obligation. Mostly, though, these multiple words for prayer help us begin to get a sense of the multi-layered meanings of prayer and the purpose of prayer within Judaism.

At its most basic level, many religious and non-religious Jews will likely describe prayer as a means to communicate or connect with God. However, as is true with most Jewish values and ideas, there is no one single, agreed-upon reason as to why we pray. For some Jews, prayer is a *mitzvah*, a sacred, daily obligation to fulfill. Some, who believe that God has the ability to intervene in our lives and in the workings of the world, pray with the purpose of "convincing" God to act in ways that would bring benefit to themselves and those for whom they care. Some use prayer not as a time to petition God, but simply as a time to connect with God, to be in God's presence. Some who do not believe in God or who do not believe in God's ability to interact directly with the world, direct their prayers inward as a means of bringing about change within

themselves. Some "take a middle position of one sort or another, believing that prayer indeed aims to change humans, but this has a cosmic effect on the world and on God, who does have the power to intervene in worldly affairs" (Comins, p. 40).

Biblical Origins of Personal Prayer

While there is no specific commandment to pray in the Hebrew Bible, there are numerous instances where our biblical ancestors engaged in personal prayer. In Genesis 24:63 we read, "And Isaac went forth to pray in the field toward evening," and in Genesis 25:21 Isaac prayed again, this time for his wife, Rebecca, when she was having difficulty becoming pregnant. In Numbers 12:13, Moses prayed for God to heal his sister, Miriam; he prayed for himself in Deuteronomy 3:24-25 that he might cross into the Promised Land. In I Samuel 1:11, Hannah prayed silently to God to allow her to have a child, and in Daniel 6:10, Daniel prayed to God by bowing low, facing Jerusalem, at least three times every day.

Beginning in the Book of Exodus we see examples of the Israelite community, as a whole, addressing God in what can be understood as a form of personal prayer. In Exodus 2:23 we read, "… the children of Israel groaned from their labor, and they cried out, and their cry ascended to God." Their suffering led them to reach out to God with the hope that God would intervene and bring an end to their enslavement. Then, in the midst of their exodus from Egypt, as they stood on the shore of the Sea of Reeds, we read: "… [T]he children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold the Egyptians were advancing after them. They were very frightened, and the children of Israel cried out to God (Exodus 14:10)." This time, fear drove their prayers. After they crossed the Sea of Reeds and were safely on the far shore, Moses led the Israelites in a song

of gratitude and praise directed to God. Regarding these different Exodus passages, Hammer (1994) notes:

> The story of the Exodus is thus bracketed by words addressed to God. The first, the cry to God to save them, is a *bakashah* or request for help. The second, the Song of the Sea, is both the act of praise, exaltation and glorification, which the Sages called *shevach* (praise), and thanksgiving unto God, proclaiming God's sovereignty, known as *hoda'ah* (thankful acknowledgement). These three elements are the basic components of Jewish prayer for all time. (p. 41)

These three types of prayers make up the bulk of the fixed prayers found within a *siddur*, or Jewish prayer book. Personal prayers also often include requests, words of thanksgiving and even expressions of praise. However, personal prayer is not limited to these areas of human experiences. The Book of Psalms branches out from these three general areas of formal Jewish prayers to also include expressions of anger, despair, joy, as well as personal and communal lament. Regarding the Book of Psalms, Sarna (1993) explains:

> In the Law and the Prophets, God reaches out to man. The initiative is [God's]. The message is [God's]. [God] communicates, we receive. Our God-given free will allows us to be receptive, to be accepting, to turn a deaf ear, to reject. In the Psalms, human beings reach out to God. The initiative is human. The language is human. We make an effort to communicate. (p.2)

The Psalms, in essence, are a collection of personal prayers. Jewish tradition credits King David as the author of the Book of Psalms. In *Midrash Tehillim*, commenting on Psalm 18, we read, "Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Judah: 'Whatever David says in his Book [of Psalms] pertains to himself, to all Israel, and to all times." For generations, people have turned to

the Book of Psalms to find expressions for almost every human feeling and circumstance, including words that give voice to experiences and emotions that are often difficult to articulate. For example, to express anguish or lament at events over which we have little control we can turn to Psalm 102 where we read, "O God, hear my prayer; let my cry come before You. Do not hide Your face from me in my time of trouble" (Psalms 102:1-2). To express anger at those people or events that bring suffering to our lives we might read from Psalm 5: "O God, lead me along Your righteous [path] because of my watchful foes…. Condemn them, O God; let them fall by their own devices; cast them out for their many crimes, for they defy You" (Psalm 5:9, 11). Finally, when someone we love is ill, Jewish tradition prescribes a set of thirty-six psalms to read on their behalf.

One of the most beautiful aspects of the Book of Psalms is that through the varied themes of each psalm, people are invited to bring their whole selves before God, even the parts of the self that feel broken or shameful. In Psalm 139 we read: "O God, You have examined me and know me…. If I say, 'Surely darkness will conceal me … darkness is not dark for You'" (Psalm 139:1, 11-12). Verses from the Book of the Psalms have been incorporated into the formal liturgy of the prayer book, but as a collection, many people still turn to the Psalms today to find words for their personal prayers and as a way to personally connect with God.

Talmudic Origins of Personal Prayer

After the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70CE, Rabbinic authorities ushered in a transformation of Judaism from a sacrificial cult to a faith that was centered around study, set worship, and the regular performance of acts of loving kindness. In the Talmud, we read of a disagreement between the Sages over the origins of daily worship in Jewish communal

life. First we read: “Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina said the prayers were instituted by the Patriarchs.” This is often taken to mean that, through their personal prayers, the patriarchs established the thrice daily prayer routine of traditional Judaism. Specifically, Abraham created the service of *shacharit* (morning prayers), Isaac created the service of *mincha* (afternoon prayers) and Jacob created the service of *ma’ariv* (evening prayers). In that same Talmudic passage, we read: “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said the prayers were instituted based on the daily [sacrificial] offerings” (*Berakhot* 26b). This is understood to mean that the prayers of communal worship paralleled the sacrifices, both in terms of time (morning, afternoon and evening) and content. For example, just as there were sacrifices offered in thanksgiving, prayers of thanksgiving became part of the fixed liturgy. Just as there was a sacrificial peace offering, so was there a communal prayer for peace.

In general, the Talmudic Sages seemed to prefer the notion of communal prayer over the notion of personal prayer. After reviewing numerous Rabbinic sources, Abrahams (1908) explains this preference by writing:

> A human judge, we are reminded, hears only one side at a time; God hears the whole world at once. The Shechinah, or divine presence, rests on ten when praying together, ten forming a quorum for public worship. It is possible that some irresistible power was attributed to the prayers of a congregation, and one catches suspicious echoes in Rabbinic literature of this unworthy belief, but it is nowhere explicitly enunciated. The idea rather seems that the individual petition counts less in such prayers, and the individual's own peculiar claims are merged in and reinforced by the mass. (p.280)

Especially when it came to making personal petitions to God, the Rabbis felt that it was better to insert those types of personal requests into the fixed prayers of communal worship.

However, this should not be misunderstood to mean that the Rabbis did not value the notion of personal prayer. On the contrary, the Sages actually engaged in numerous discussions formulating specific understandings of what one's personal prayers should and should not contain. For example, the Rabbis warned against uttering what they referred to as a *tefilat shav*, or a prayer made "in vain." In *Berakhot* 60a we read: "The one who supplicates God concerning what has already come to pass utters a vain prayer." Praying for a cancer diagnosis not to have happened is a waste of one's prayer. It is better, according to the Rabbis, to pray to for the strength to endure treatments and be healed from the disease. The Rabbis also cautioned against what they called an *Iyun Tefilah*, or calculation in prayer. As Abrahams (1908) notes: "Calculation in prayer is the expectation of an answer to prayer as a due claim, and the Rabbis protest with much vehemence against such *expectation* of a divine response to prayer of any kind whatsoever" (p. 276). Finally, while the Rabbis do not admonish those who pray for what they, themselves, might need, they do encourage people to pray on behalf of others first. The Talmud teaches that the one who prays for God's mercy on behalf of another will be answered "from heaven" before the one who prays just for oneself (*Bava Kama* 92a).

As a congregational rabbi, I have witnessed members of the synagogue expressing some of these same Rabbinic concerns when it comes to personal prayer, even though they may not be familiar with the specific Talmudic teachings. Once, in a pastoral counseling session, a member shared that she was hesitant to pray because she was afraid that her prayers would not be answered, which might cause her to lose faith. She both expected God to help her and was scared that God would not. Her conclusion was that it was better not to pray at all. There have also been numerous members who have confided in me that while they have no problem praying for the health and wellbeing of others, they simply cannot pray for themselves because "it just

doesn't feel right." Unfortunately, for some, it seems as though concerns about what is "acceptable" in one's personal prayers become an obstacle to praying at all.

Still, the Rabbis' focus on what one's personal prayers should contain, and even when personal prayers should be uttered, was meant to help make personal prayers as "effective" as possible. For example, the majority of the Rabbis agree that making space for personal prayers within the standard liturgy was important for worshippers. However, they disagreed on where those personal prayers should be placed. In *Berakhot* 16b-17a, there is a debate about where the best place might be to insert personal prayers within a section of the liturgy known as the *Amidah*. Some of the Rabbis believed personal words should be sprinkled in throughout the eighteen separate benedictions. Others believed that personal prayers should be saved until the very end. Eventually, adding personal prayers to the end of the *Amidah* became the standard practice in synagogue worship. Even today, Jewish congregations pause after the recitation of the full *Amidah* to allow worshippers a few moments for their own silent, personal prayers.

This same section of the Talmud (*Berakhot* 16b-17a) contains examples of personal prayers from at least ten different Sages who added their own words onto the end of the *Amidah*. One of these personal prayers by Mar, son of Ravina, reads, in part:

> O God, guard my speech from evil and my lips from deception. Before those who slander me, I will hold my tongue; I will practice humility. Open my heart to Your Torah, that I may pursue Your mitzvot. As for all who think evil of me, cancel their designs and frustrate their schemes. Act for Your own sake, for the sake of Your power, for the sake of Your holiness, for the sake of Your Torah; so that Your loved ones may be rescued, save with Your power. And answer me. (translation from *Mishkan Tefilah* 2007, p. 62)

This prayer was eventually included at the end of the standard *Amidah* in most prayer books, becoming part of the fixed liturgy of the Jewish people. The editors of the *siddur* seemed to understand that personal prayer can sometimes be a challenge for people, and they wanted to include a prayer that worshippers could turn to if they had no words of their own. This example of personal prayers, over time, becoming part of the fixed liturgy is not unique. Hammer (1994) notes:

> The Siddur itself has been an open book to which one could add personal prayers or create new prayers to enhance the traditional framework. Throughout the ages, from rabbinic times until the modern period, poetic masters and leaders of prayer have created new poetic prayers … wherever Jews lived and worshipped. (p. 291)

These "new poetic prayers" are called *piyyutim*, and they are an example not only of how personal prayers became fixed prayers, but *piyyutim* are also one example of the way that personal prayers are embraced in the Jewish tradition.

Forms of Personal Prayer: *Piyyutim*, *Tkhines*, and *Hitbodedut*

There are at least three ways in which the Jewish faith has ritually and liturgically affirmed the importance of personal prayer. *Piyyutim*, *tkhines* and *hitbodedut* are types of personal prayers or personal prayer practices that have allowed individuals to express themselves directly to God.

A *piyyut* is a poem written as a preface for a liturgical ritual or to amplify or substitute for part of the formal liturgy. *Piyyutim* were written as far back as the fifth century out of a desire to both broaden and deepen the meaning of the formal liturgy. Many *piyyutim*, like *Yigdal* and *Adon Olam*, have become standard parts of the *siddur*. (Lieber, 2015) *Piyyutim* remind

worshippers that inspiration for personal, informal prayer does not have to come only from profound experiences out in nature or meaningful moments of joy or painful times of loss. Inspiration can be found by simply opening up a prayer book and reading through the formal liturgy with a curious mind and open heart.

Tkhines is a Yiddish word, derived from the Hebrew, *techinot*, which means "supplications." From the time of the Temple through the early nineteenth century, Jewish girls and women were barred from learning Hebrew, and therefore were unable to read and participate in much of formal Jewish worship experiences. However, they still had a desire to pray. As women, they also had many unique experiences that were not reflected in the traditional *siddur*. From the sixteenth through nineteenth century in Europe, *tkhines* emerged as personal prayers written and published in Yiddish, which were accessible to women and that spoke to women's particular religious and life experiences. For example, there were *tkhines* for entering the *mikvah* (ritual bath), preparing the Sabbath meal, and preparing to light Shabbat candles. There were also personal *tkhines* describing a woman's desire to become pregnant or her longing to deliver her baby safely (Weissler, n.d.). *Tkhines* affirm the idea that there are no parts of a person's life that are "off-limits" when it comes to connecting with God. While it is often necessary to present oneself in a certain way in social situations, even among friends, Judaism believes that personal prayer is a place where people can freely share their authentic desires, worries, hopes and fears.

This is certainly true in the spiritual practice of *hitbodedut*. *Hitbodedut* means "seclusion," and is the term for a spiritual practice outlined by the great eighteenth century Hasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Rabbi Nachman encouraged people to spend time alone every day talking to God. He was clear that people should speak to God from their hearts

in their native language regarding whatever they are thinking or feeling, even if they feel far from God or feel they have nothing to say. He wrote:

> No matter what a person is lacking in worshiping God—even if they are totally and absolutely distant from God's service—they should speak about it all and ask it of God, as mentioned above. Even if occasionally a person's words are sealed and they cannot open their mouth to say anything at all to God, this itself is nonetheless very good. That is, their readiness and their presence before God, and their yearning and longing to speak despite their inability to do so—this in itself is also very good. (*Likutei Moharan*, Part II 25:1)

Unlike personal prayer, which is often said silently to oneself, *hitbodedut* encourages people to speak their words to God out loud. An example of instructions for *hitbodedut* is as follows:

> Find a place where you will not feel strange talking out loud…. Begin talking to God / the Universe – to Something "out there," regardless of whether or not you think you are being heard…. Just pretend if you need to, but use the language of "you." Talk about whatever you like; share what's in your heart… The main thing is that you don't stop talking. (Spitzer, 2022, p. 115-166)

Hitbodedut is a practice that can help people articulate some of their most profound questions, longings, doubts, and desires. It is also a practice that can help people feel a sense of God's presence (or a Source of wisdom or love that is greater than themselves) even when they are not sure they believe in God or that greater Source. *Hitbodedut* can include traditional words of prayer, but it is just as likely that someone speaking during *hitbodedut* will list the objects they see around them or talk about their discomfort in engaging in this practice at all.

Piyyutim, *tkhines*, and *hitbodedut* are all outlets of expression for one's personal or spiritual longings. They are also a reminder that no particular Hebrew or Judaic knowledge is necessary to express oneself when it comes to personal prayer. One of the most important Jewish dictums when it comes to understanding what God most wants from people when it comes to prayer (both personal and communal) is simply this: "God seeks the heart" (*Sanhedrin* 106b).

Keva and Kavanah

When the Rabbis of Jewish tradition say that "God seeks the heart" what they are mostly referring to is the Hebrew notion of *kavanah*. *Kavanah* refers to the personal attention, honesty, and devotion that one brings to an act of worship, similar to the heartfelt intentions the patriarchs brought to their personal prayers. *Kavanah* is often compared and contrasted to *keva,* or the predictable content, order, and regularity of worship, similar to the predictable structure of the sacrificial system.

Keva is important to the Jewish notion of prayer for a number of reasons. First, one of the purposes of prayer is to communicate and connect with God. Another way to frame this purpose is to say that prayer has the potential to increase one's awareness of God in one's life. The more that we engage in prayer as a *regular* practice, the more opportunities we have to become aware of God's presence in our lives (Rich, n.d.). Second, praying the same words in the same order that have been prayed by multiple generations of Jews of the past has the potential to connect us not only with God, but also to connect us with our ancestors, as well as the larger Jewish community. Finally, the words of the fixed liturgy can lift a person up from their self-centered desires and remind them of what God wants for them. As Kushner (1994) explains:

> A fixed liturgy confronts us with thoughts and affirmations that might not occur to us if we relied on our own imaginations, and says them better than we could phrase them ourselves. The very first page of the Jewish prayer book prods me to express my gratitude for having awakened alive to the new day, for the fact that my mind works, my eyes work, my arms and legs work. I give thanks for having clothes to put on and things to look forward to that day. Would I remember to be grateful for all these things every morning, especially on cold, gloomy mornings when I had not slept well and my body was stiff and sore, if I didn't have the prayer book to structure my thoughts for me? (p. 203)

People often think of prayer (fixed or personal) as the words they formulate or read to share with God. However, another way to look at the fixed liturgy is to think of the prayers of the *siddur* as a way of listening to the values, priorities, and hopes that God has for individuals as well as the community.

While *keva* is important, the Rabbis of the Talmud ultimately place a higher priority on a person's *kavanah*. For example, in *Mishnah Berakhot* 2:1 we read: "If one was studying Torah, and it came time to recite [*Shema*]: if a person directed their mind with intention (*kavanah*), they have fulfilled their obligation. And if not, they have not fulfilled their obligation." If one prays with intention, the commandment for completing that prayer has been fulfilled. But if one prays without focusing one's heart, then it is as if they have not actually prayed, and they need to repeat the prayers again. *Kavanah* can and should be applied to fixed prayers, as well as personal prayers.

Kavanah became particularly important in the Hasidic tradition of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hasidic rabbis told numerous stories regarding the priority of *kavanah*

over *keva* when it comes to prayer. The most iconic stories have to do with individuals who do not know how to read Hebrew or the proper order of the prayers in a worship service, but by the sincerity of their *kavanah* are able to carry the prayers of all the other worshippers straight to God. For example, in Agnon's (1995/1937) High Holiday anthology we read of a villager whose son could not read or even recite any of the prayers. After the boy turned thirteen, his father brought him to the house of study of the Baal Shem Tov on Yom Kippur to make sure he did not get into any trouble on such a holy day. The boy had a flute he used to play while he tended his father's flocks, and he brought the flute with him to the house of study. At one point in the service the boy was spiritually moved and wanted to play his flute in response. Because it is forbidden to play instruments on Yom Kippur, his father reprimanded him. Eventually the boy could not contain himself and he took the flute and blew a loud and powerful note. In response, the Baal Shem Tov shortened his prayers and concluded the service. The father was mortified but the Baal Shem Tov announced to the congregation that he was grateful to the boy, because it was only due to the boy's sincere longing for God that he was able to play "the note of his heart truly, without any distraction … and by this means all the prayers were lifted up" (p. 36-38).

Hammer (1994) explains that stories like these affirm Judaism's position that formal, rote prayers are not superior to informal, personal prayers and that opening oneself up to God in any manner one is able is all God really wants. He writes: "Lack of knowledge may be an impediment to formal prayer, to Jewish communal prayer, but not to prayer itself. One may begin without the slightest knowledge of traditional prayers and thus enter the world of prayer" (p. 290).

While *kavanah* does not require formal knowledge of any particular liturgy, it does require practice. It is not easy to focus one's attention on connecting with the Holy One. For

example, in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides shares his thoughts on how one can begin to enter into prayer with the proper *kavanah*. He explains:

> What is the [proper] intent? He should empty his heart of all thoughts and view himself as though standing in the presence of God. Therefore, one must sit awhile before prayer in order to focus one's heart, and afterwards pray in tranquility and with [feelings of] supplication. He should not pray as if bearing a burden that he discards and then departs. (Laws of Prayer 4.16, as cited in Kreisel, 2015)

For Maimonides, as we shall see, prayer was not simply about unburdening oneself. Prayer was primarily about preparing oneself to receive God's presence in one's life.

Medieval Philosophers and Prayer

Maimonides, as well as many Western European Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, brought a different perspective to prayer that is worth noting as it is a perspective that may resonate with some modern worshippers today. Kreisel (2015) explains that these rabbis and philosophers were all heavily influenced by an Aristotelian view of God as a "completely unchanging deity" (p. 401). Therefore, they did not believe that God intervenes in the course of history or in one's personal life. Petitioning God for a particular outcome through prayer did not make sense to them. Maimonides believed that the primary purpose of prayer was to contemplate God. According to Kreisel, "Maimonides does not indicate in detail what should be the content of this contemplation, but he ties it to the true apprehension of God, in opposition to thoughts that are the product of one's imagination" (p. 418).

In the fourteenth century, philosophers like Nissim ben Moses of Marseille and David ben Samuel HaKokhavi explained that prayer allows worshippers to connect with as aspect of

God that helps them strengthen their own intellect, imagination and courage. Once this happens, the worshipper finds the resources within themselves to fight off illness or overcome other challenges (Kreisel, p. 399-400, p. 423-424).

While these Medieval thinkers definitely acknowledged prayer as a means to connect with a particular aspect of God (what they referred to as the Active Intellect), they stressed that one of the main purposes of prayer was for the worshipper to be able to summon their *own* strength and knowledge. With these resources gathered, the worshipper could then, in essence, "answer their own prayers." In speaking with members of the congregation, I know that this understanding of the purpose of prayer still resonates with people today. After the Holocaust, it has become even more difficult for some people to believe that God has the ability to intervene in history (Cohn-Sherbok, 1990). Therefore, they wonder, what is the purpose of prayer? While they cannot imagine asking God for particular outcomes, they may find comfort in the belief that prayer can help them muster the will or find the clarity that will help them take the next best step.

Hasidism and Prayer

As was briefly noted above, when it came to prayer, early Hasidic rabbis placed great emphasis on the notion of *kavanah*, the intentions and devotions with which one prays. Green and Holtz (1987) note that of the three primary pillars of Jewish religious life (study, worship and the performance of acts of lovingkindness), Hasidism viewed prayer as central to what it meant to be Jewish. They explain:

> The nature and relative importance of these three pillars of religious life, the intellectual, the devotional, and the activist, have been debated by rabbis and their disciples over the course of many centuries. It was always assumed that the three were deeply intertwined,

> and that a proper balance among them formed the ideal of Jewish religiosity…; nevertheless, there were times and places in the history of Judaism in which one value or another seemed to achieve the place of primacy in the ids of pious reflecting Jews. This is nowhere as clear as in the early period of Hasidism…. Here worship, particularly in the form of contemplative prayer, came to be clearly identified as the central focus of the Jew's religious life. (p. 2)

Hasidic rabbis provided their followers with some general instructions as to how to engage in this kind of contemplative worship. Like Maimonides, the Baal Shem Tov (founder of Hasidism) encouraged worshippers to take time to prepare themselves for prayer by reciting Psalms or studying Torah beforehand. However, he also cautioned worshippers to avoid putting too much of themselves into these kinds of preparations "lest they consume all your strength and leave no room for prayer itself" (*Toldot Yakov Yosef* 83a as cited in Green & Holtz, 1987, p. 34). Hasidic rabbis believed that the worshipper needed to engage one's entire body in the act of prayer. They also valued letters as the building blocks of words, and words as the building blocks of Creation (in the first chapter of Genesis, God creates the world via the spoken word). They believed that the purpose of prayer was to return those letters, those building blocks, to their Source. Again, the Baal Shem Tov explains:

> Put all your strength into the words, proceeding from letter to letter with such concentration that you lose awareness of your bodily self. It will then seem that the letters themselves are flowing into one another. This uniting of the letters in one's greatest joy. If joy is felt as two human bodies come together how much greater must be the joy of this union in spirit. (*Keter Shem Tov* 72b as cited in Green & Holtz, 1987, p. 44).

Finally, the Hasidic rabbis note how difficult it is to engage in prayer with this level of *kavanah* and concentration. They encourage worshippers not to become frustrated if they are distracted during prayer. Instead, they teach that these distractions are not only natural, but that they can also be used as tools for learning more about oneself and for growing closer with God. Modern worshippers may find Hasidic teachings on prayer, with their emphasis on simplicity and their acknowledgement of the natural obstacles that can arise when trying to develop a personal prayer practice, instructive and comforting.

Modern Thoughts on Prayer

Numerous twentieth and twenty-first century religious thinkers expand upon the Biblical, Talmudic, Medieval and Hasidic understandings of the purpose of prayer in one's life. Rabbi Harold Schulweis (1994) speaks about prayer as a way of coming to know the self within a covenantal relationship between a person and God. For Schulweis, the Biblical notion that people are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, is the binding force of this covenant. According to Schulweis:

> This root idea [*b'tzelem Elohim*] forms the common ground of discourse between the two significant others of the covenant. The worshipper is not an ear into which orders are shouted or an automaton to be moved about by the will of the Divine Other. In covenantal prayer, the petitioner cannot pretend he does not know God or that he cannot act responsibly. Prayer is a way of discovering who we are and what we must do to know God…. Between God and man is a compact that enables prayers of dependence and acquiescence to become prayers of interdependence and mutual responsibility. Prayer is

> more than something to be asked for. Prayer is the constant search for the means of repair of the self and the world. (p. 38-39)

Martin Buber also describes prayer as a way of coming to know the true self in relationship to God. Kramer (2010) notes that for Buber, genuine prayer means praying dialogically, which "enables us to notice God's spirit becoming manifest. As with dialogue between person and person, dialogue with God demands reciprocal and reciprocating habits of the spirt: the habits of turning, addressing, listening and responding" (p. 232). Turning refers to turning away from ego-driven needs and toward God as a partner. Addressing means praising, thanking or revealing one's needs or concerns to God. Listening involves maintaining a silence as you listen for or sense any stirrings or signs of response. Responding means bringing forth any insights from the experience into your life (Kramer, p. 232). As God's presence becomes more known, so do we come to know, embrace, and share our truest selves.

Like Buber, listening and responding are important components of prayer for Rabbi Toba Spitzer (2022). She notes that one of Judaism's central prayers, the *Shema*, literally means "Listen." The prayer is taken from a section in the Book of Deuteronomy "in which the command to hear and to do is repeated over and over again. In the Torah, listening to the divine Voice is connected to action. To truly listen is to have something demanded of us" (p. 105). Prayer is about more than using our voices to call out to God, because communication is about more than speaking. In order to be *in* communication with another, listening is an important skill. This means that prayer can entail dedicated times of silence where there is no need to form words of praise, gratitude, or requests. Prayer can also include listening deeply for those truths that come from a Source of wisdom or love that is more expansive that just our own thinking minds.

Beyond knowing ourselves or listening deeply, many rabbis and theologians describe prayer as simply part of the human condition. Rabbi Art Green (1992) asserts that the "need to pray exists prior to any particular theology or definition of God. In fact, theology is a response of intellect to the reality of the need to pray…. It is the mind's articulation of truth the heart already knows" (p. 13). Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (2009) expressed this need as something essential to living a full and meaningful life. He wrote:

> Judah Halevi, the great eleventh-century poet, said that prayer is to the soul what food is to the body. Without prayer, something within us atrophies and dies. It is possible to have a life without prayer, just as it is possible to have a life without music, or love, or laughter, but it is a diminished thing, missing whole dimensions of experience. We need space within the soul to express our joy in being, our wonder at the universe, our hopes, our fears, our failures, our aspirations—bringing our deepest thoughts as offerings to the One who listens, and listening, in turn, to the One who calls. (Sacks, 2009, par. 6)

There are moments in life when people become aware of how rich, wondrous, and even miraculous their lives are. Within the smallest, most mundane moments when one becomes aware of a deep sense of gratitude simply for being alive. Moments like this can be honored through formal or personal words of prayer.

Some clergy postulate that the need to pray arises out of an innate sense of longing humans have to connect with something greater than their singles selves. In *Making Prayer Real* (2010), Rabbi Mimi Feigelson writes not only of our longing to reach out to God, but also of our desire to be seen and known by God.

> Prayer is about longing and belonging. To "belong" is to "be-in-longing." Praying is being able to say, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, Master of the World, I belong to you, and I am in-

> longing for you. I believe that You long for me, and are in-longing for me." When we can identify where we belong, to whom we belong, to whom we are in-longing, then our lives have been transformed (Comins, p. 49).

According to this understanding, prayer is a way of rooting oneself in relationship to God. Prayer can also be a way of rooting oneself in relationship with others, whether that means the people in one's family or people in the broader community. For example, a member once shared that she grew up in a family that recited the *Shehechiyanu* (a prayer that is recited on the first evening of holidays or the first time one is experiencing a life cycle moment) the first time they experienced anything new together (e.g., the first time they traveled to a new city, the first time they tried a new food, etc.). Although this woman is now a young adult, living on her own, every time she has a new experience, she recites the *Shehechiyanu* and says that when she does, she immediately feels connected to the members of her family.

This sense of feeling rooted or grounded might also help people if they find themselves facing uncertainty. Whether one is confronting illness, entering a new stage of life, or struggling within a relationship, turning to prayer may be a way to meet a longing one has to control that which is often uncontrollable.

In *Man's Quest for God* (1954), Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel also speaks about prayer in connection with longing. However, he sees the origin of this longing stemming from the existential loneliness that comes from being human.

> The thirst for companionship … indicates the intense loneliness from which we suffer. We are alone even with our friends. The smattering of understanding which a human being has to offer is not enough to satisfy our need of sympathy. Human eyes can see the foam, but not the seething at the bottom. In the hour of greatest agony we are alone. It is

> such a sense of solitude which prompts the heart to seek the companionship of God. [God] alone perceives the motives of our actions; [God] alone can be truly trusted. Prayer is confidence, unbosoming oneself to God. (p. 17)

The solitude that Heschel describes could be borne out of feelings of loneliness, as well as an existential angst that arises when we are confronted with illness, suffering, or simply our own mortality. Both types of solitude, to varying degrees, were part of people's emotional experience during the pandemic. According to Heschel, these feelings could be a prompt for people to reach out to God in prayer, which could then be a source of comfort as people honestly unburden themselves to God.

In writing about prayer Heschel also finds great meaning in the Talmudic idea that the traditional worship service and the content of Jewish prayer originally derived from the sacrifices. He connects the notion of sacrifice to prayer by saying:

> The statement that since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, prayer has taken the place of sacrifice does not imply that sacrifice was abolished when the sacrificial cult went out of existence. Prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice. Prayer is sacrifice. What has changed is the substance of sacrifice: the self took the place of the thing. The spirit is the same. (*Man's Quest for God,* p. 70-71)

For Heschel, prayer is an act of offering oneself and opening oneself fully to God. In order to do this, the worshipper must make oneself vulnerable, which is often not an easy thing to do, and why prayer can sometimes feel overwhelming or out of reach. In her book, *Talking to God*, Rabbi Naomi Levy (2002) tries to simplify prayer for people by writing:

> It is remarkable to see what can emerge from us when we stop trying to pray to God and start *talking* to God instead. Too often we envision prayer as something saintly or proper.

> Something that has strict rules and standards. We get intimidated and inhibited. But talking to God is a very natural and intimate experience. We can talk to God anywhere: in the shower, in the care, at work, in bed. We don't need to sound smart or polished. We don't need to ask anyone else to do it for us. (p. 4)

In fact, no one else can do it for us. Personal prayer is just that, personal. Personal prayer can take numerous forms, occur at any time and in any location, and include any words, thoughts, or feelings of the mind and heart. However, even with all of that latitude, there are still numerous obstacles that people encounter when they pray, and especially when they attempt to develop a personal prayer practice.

Religious Obstacles to Prayer

Challenges to developing a regular prayer practice are, in some ways, similar to the challenges of creating any new regular practice; habits are hard to form. There are, though, some obstacles in creating a prayer practice, or simply engaging in prayer at all, that are unique. First, when it comes to creating a prayer practice, Rabbi Naomi Levy (2002) notes:

> Daily prayer is the hardest form of prayer. It's natural to turn to God when things go wrong – when you are in pain or when you are frightened or depressed. It's easy to turn to God in times of joy – at a birth or a wedding, or on a holiday. But making the commitment to open your heart up to God every single day is quite a challenge…. All too often, daily prayer seems like a tedious burden. We want our experiences of prayer to be inspirational, exceptional, but daily prayer is rooted in the unspectacular routine of our lives.

So, one challenge to creating a prayer practice is the false expectation people sometimes have that prayer should be reserved for special or extreme times in their lives. The logic seems to be that if prayer helps to sanctify a moment, then the moment must already be momentous in order for it to be deemed holy. In Judaism, as in most faith traditions, this is simply not true. The Talmud teaches that we are to recite one hundred blessings, one hundred small prayers, every single day (*Menachot* 43b). This implies that on every day, whether that day is wonderful, horrible, or boring, there will be at least one hundred moments where we are invited to use prayer to make ourselves aware of God's presence in our lives.

Of course, whether we believe that God can actually be present in our lives is another challenge to prayer, in general. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman (2000) sums up a major obstacle for many Reform Jews when it comes to prayer when he writes:

> The way into prayer starts with a giant hurdle that other areas of Jewish life and lore need not contend with. Prayer seems to presuppose the existence of a deity who listens to what we say, wants us to say it, and somehow responds. Prayer is not simply a question of what Jews say to God. It is about the God who is at the other end, listening. (*The Way Into Jewish Prayer*, p. 2)

If prayer, at its most basic level, is a form of communication or connection with God, then one's personal theology will greatly impact how one understands the place of prayer in their life. For many Jews, their personal theology has likely been at least somewhat influenced by their exposure to the language of Jewish liturgy. For some, this language has helped deepen their connection to God. For example, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2009) notes:

> In prayer we speak to a presence vaster than the unfathomable universe, yet closer to us than we are to ourselves: the God beyond, who is also the Voice within. Though language

> must fail when we try to describe a Being beyond all parameters of speech, language is all we have, and it is enough. For God who made the world with creative words, and who revealed His will through holy words, listens to our prayerful words. Language is the bridge joining us to Infinity. (Sacks, 2009, par. 5)

For others, the language of prayer is actually one of the greatest obstacles in fostering their relationship with God. Most Hebrew blessings begin in the same formulaic way: *Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam* / Blessed are You, my Lord, our God, King of the world. Even when we substitute more gender-neutral terms like "Eternal" or "Ruler," the image is still the same; a deity sitting on a throne "on high," ruling the world from a distance. Monarchs are not known for being able to relate to the struggles and challenges of their subjects. If this is one's image of God, it might be difficult to pour out one's heart in prayer and expect to feel comforted or even heard. Rabbi David Wolpe (1990) elaborates:

> The tradition accepts that God will embrace any prayer that is offered willingly and fervently. This does not make prayer easy. For if the assurance of acceptance is one difference between human and Divine communication, the other difference is the uncertainty of response. We cannot know if anyone is listening. Is prayer truly a dialogue, or only a monologue? Any response in our lives to prayer is erratic at best. At times it is tempting to believe that something has been granted in answer to our request. In more sober moments we realize, however, that prayers do not appear to be answered in this world, that far too much is faithfully asked for and not given. If what we ask for is not granted, can we still maintain this is a "response"? Only inside can we feel if there is any reply…. Everyone who prays struggles with the deep fear that this time, the only answer will be absence, silence. (p. 99)

Opening oneself to God in prayer is a risk because it can leave a person feeling vulnerable. To make oneself vulnerable, one must have some measure of trust that in that vulnerability they will be met, seen, or affirmed. In a relationship with God, this sense of being seen and affirmed is a matter of faith.

Wolpe observes that everyone who prays struggles. This includes people who have a very different image of God as the transcendent monarch perched on a heavenly throne or a God whose only job is to dole out judgments. Even for people who believe in Elijah's description of God as a "still small Voice" (First Kings 19:13), and who may connect with God's immanence as part of their own inner being, prayer can be a challenge. Again, Wolpe notes:

> The uncertainty of an answer is not the only obstacle to prayer. Even in more positive moments, when one is feeling the assurance of God's acceptance, to present oneself fully to God is extraordinarily difficult. We know the enormous resistance that wells up inside us when we seek to open ourselves to another human being. Fear rises like a wall in the soul and fights to keep us locked in and safe. That same wall rises when we seek to pray. At times it looms larger, since to open oneself to God entails greater surrender, even less certainty. (p. 99)

As a congregational rabbi, I have listened as members try to articulate their challenges with prayer in this way. They are uncomfortable during moments of silent prayer within the larger sanctuary service because, in their words, they "don't know what to say." I have often wondered if it only feels as though they do not know what to say during prayer or if, in fact, they simply will not allow themselves to open to up to God in this way.

Finally, a significant obstacle when it comes to Jewish prayer is lack of knowledge. While almost every Jewish source affirm that knowledge of Hebrew or formal liturgy is not

required in order to engage in personal prayer, some people may want their personal prayers to be connected to traditional liturgy. However, if they are unfamiliar with Hebrew they may feel unable to engage. Also, in many Reform congregations, the experience of personal prayer is not discussed. This, alone, can create numerous obstacles for engaging in personal prayer. If people feel they are not knowledgeable enough to pray the "right way," but personal prayer is not discussed in their synagogue community, they may feel stuck with no place to turn for help. This obstacle can impact not only the individual, but potentially multiple generations. For example, if congregations are not explicitly encouraging personal prayer as a kind of spiritual practice and parents do not feel equipped to model personal prayer at home, it may be more difficult for children to feel comfortable with personal prayer, let alone develop a personal prayer practice of their own.

In Summary

Prayer has been an integral part of Jewish tradition since its inception. Beginning with the Book of Genesis, our holiest texts describe our ancestors' yearning to connect with a Source in the universe that feels both beyond comprehension and, at the same time, intimately close. Throughout the centuries, Rabbis, theologians, and philosophers have described their understandings of the purpose of prayer, the benefits of prayer, and the most effective ways to engage in prayer. In Judaism, prayer is seen as a means of connecting with God, connecting with the community, and connecting with oneself. In order to do so, one must infuse one's prayers with *kavanah*, bringing one's full self to the experience. Despite the potential benefits of prayer, there are also numerous obstacles that people experience when they try to engage in prayer. This is true even with personal prayer, where no specific knowledge of Hebrew or Jewish liturgy is

required. Because prayer is a lifelong practice that can be entered into at any time, it is less helpful to think of these obstacles as something to "overcome." Instead, these obstacles should be approached as challenges that can and should be worked on each time one opens themselves up in prayer.

Psychological Reflections and Literature Review

Definitions and Types of Prayer

William James, a pioneer in the psychology of religion, gave a series of lectures on religion at the University of Edinburgh between 1901-1902. These lectures were published in 1903 in *The Varieties of Religious Experiences: A Study in Human Nature*. In his penultimate lecture, he defined prayer as "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine" (James, 1903, p. 464). This definition has been the starting point of numerous subsequent psychological and sociological studies.

In the *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine*, Burdzy and Pargament (2013) define prayer "by two fundamental principles: (1) prayer is a form of communication and (2) the exchange of communication takes place between the self and the transcendent, immanent, and numinous forces that represent human notions of the sacred" (p. 98). The American Psychological Association's (APA) definition of prayer is "communication (voiced or contemplative) with a deity or other such entity, generally for the purposes of praise, thanksgiving supplication, or self-examination or to seek forgiveness, guidance or serenity" (https://dictionary.apa.org/prayer).

Other researchers have expanded upon these broad definitions of prayer by breaking prayer down into categories or types. Poloma and Gallup (1991) noted four different kinds of prayer. Ritual prayer consisted of formal liturgy that those praying memorized or recited out of prayerbooks and was the type of prayer used most frequently by older adults in the study. Conversational prayer contained words that came spontaneously to those who were praying and could touch on any subject from the sharing of gratitude to the seeking of guidance. It was the form of prayer used the most by people in the study. Petitionary prayer contained specific requests for health, forgiveness, or more concrete needs. Petitionary prayer was regarded as "the

most difficult" style for contemporary Americans (p. 31). The final form of prayer in this study was meditative prayer where those praying would sit quietly as they experienced the Divine by listening, thinking, or feeling. Using these four categories of prayer, Ai, Tice, Huang, Rodgers, and Bolling (2008) studied the effects of prayer on post-operative heart patients and discovered that petitionary prayers, mediated through optimism, predicted higher levels of post-surgical well-being, while conversational prayers predicted higher levels of stress.

Laird, Snyder, Lapoff and Green (2004) created a multidimensional prayer inventory that used five distinct types of prayer: adoration (prayers praising God generally), supplication (prayers for specific requests), thanksgiving (prayers of gratitude), confession (prayers admitting to wrongdoing and seeking forgiveness), and receptive (an experience of the presence of the Divine). Whittington and Scher (2010) took this inventory and added one more type of prayer to it – obligatory prayers which consist of prayers that worshippers are required to pray as part of their faith tradition (i.e., Orthodox Jews who are obligated to pray three times a day or Muslims who are required to pray five times each day). In this study adoration, thanksgiving and receptive prayers related positively to measures of well-being while supplication, confession and obligatory prayers related negatively or neutrally to measures of well-being. Whittington and Scher noted that "the prayer types having positive effects appear to be less ego-focused, and more focused on God, whereas the negative types have an opposite nature" (p. 2).

Recognizing that all prayer is not the same is important when studying the effects that prayer can have on people. It also helps to explain why one person's understanding of prayer may not be the same as another person's understanding. For the purposes of this study, personal prayer is defined as prayers offered on one's own, distinct from congregational or communal worship. This broad definition allows people to connect to the experience of prayer in different

ways. The survey also asked participants to describe the content of their prayers to try to discern if Reform Jews coalesce around one particular type of prayer be it petitionary, confessional, thanksgiving, or receptive.

Of course, the experience of prayer is made up of much more than the specific content of one's prayers. Though James provided the field of psychology with a succinct definition of prayer, he also stated his belief that prayer is not simply a religious practice but is "the very soul and essence of religion" (1903, p. 463). He quoted Auguste Sabatier who, in 1897, wrote:

> Religion … is an intercourse, a conscious and voluntary relation, entered into by a soul in distress with the mysterious power upon which it feels itself to depend, and upon which its fate is contingent. This intercourse with God is realized by prayer. Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion … no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formula, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence--it may be even before it has a name by which to call it. Wherever this interior prayer is lacking, there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or of doctrines, we have living religion. (as cited in James, 1903, p. 464)

This is a much more expansive understanding of prayer. From this understanding, James noted that to comprehend the fullness of the prayer experience one must be concerned with more than the specific content of the communication. A person must also focus on the experience itself, or what he termed "the transaction" that occurs between the self and the sacred, and how the self is changed because of it. While difficult to measure, the nuances of the prayer experience are important to note. For the purposes of this study, the prayer experience will be explored as an

experience of longing, which numerous Jewish theologians referred to as an impetus for personal prayer; of inwardness, which some Rabbinic sources understood to be the purpose of prayer; and of transitional space, which may be understood as the place where the "transaction" of prayer occurs.

The Experience of Prayer as Longing

As demonstrated in the theological literature review above, many religious thinkers describe prayer as a kind of longing for connection with a divine power greater than themselves. Psychological researchers have begun studying the notion of what they term life longing, or Sehnsucht, based on the German words *das Sehnen*, meaning "yearning," and *sucht*, meaning "an obsession." Sehnsucht is not necessarily connected to religion or faith. However, its description as an intense unnamable longing that cannot be met by human capacity alone does point toward the spiritual. Tix (2017) defines life longings as distinct from personal goals stating, "Whereas goals appear to be more action-oriented and controllable, longings seem to provide direction and help for individuals when they experience loss, dissatisfaction, or non-resolution of difficulties" (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pursuit-peace/201709/longing-more). When people experience loss, dissatisfaction, and non-resolution of difficulties they may also turn to prayer. Or, put another way, prayer might be the expression of a person's longing in the face of separation or loss.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic could be described as a large-scale period of separation and loss for almost every person on the planet. Some people endured the most unimaginable loss of all, the loss of loved ones who did not survive those early days of the virus. Others faced the loss of jobs, income, education, family celebrations, "once-in-a-lifetime"

experiences, and more. All people faced varying degrees of separation. There was the physical separation from loved ones, of course, that at its most mild took the form of social distancing, and at its most extreme meant being physically separated from family members for weeks or months at a time. This kind of extreme separation could easily lead to feelings of loneliness. It could also lead to feelings of helplessness in some people who like or need to be of service when others are struggling. It is possible that during the onset of the pandemic, prayer fulfilled some people's longing to traverse the chasm of helplessness or loneliness that separation and loss created.

Susan Cain (2022), in her book *Bittersweet*, notes that the core of many faith traditions, as well as the impulse for creativity in all its forms, is the longing for reunion after the pain of separation. She then asks:

> But separation from what, exactly? From our soul mates, the location of whom is one of our great life tasks, the Platonic tradition suggests. From the womb, if you take a psychoanalytic view. From comfort in our own skin, usually because of some past hurt or trauma we're struggling to heal. Or, perhaps, all of these are just metaphors for, or different expressions of, separation from the divine. Separation, longing and reunion are the beating heart of most religions. We long for Eden, for Zion, for Mecca; and we long for the Beloved … [for] God. (p. 39-40)

Here, Cain posits that *all* longings are simply manifestations of our ultimate yearning to connect with God, with a source of comfort or meaning that is so much greater than any person's single, individual self. If this is true, then perhaps prayer is the spiritual mechanism that sometimes articulates, but more often simply holds and carries a person's longings for the

Divine. Froese and Jones (2021) explain this longing to be in relationship with God as an emotional need, and prayer as a way of meeting that need. They write:

> There is a consensus that prayer evokes powerful emotions in practitioners…. In fact, the emotional need to interact with God, or some other, appears to be a major reason why people pray in the first place. And if this relationship proves positive, it can deepen a sense of individual security and significance in the world. (p. 11)

At the beginning of the pandemic, especially, people's need to feel safe and significant was likely high. Those who were able to turn to the practice of prayer may have been able to meet those needs, at least in part. Yet Pargament (2007) insists people do not solely, or perhaps even primarily, turn to prayer to have other psychological needs met. He notes, "Although psychologists have focused on the role of prayer in facilitating physical health and mental health, from a spiritual perspective these analyses miss the point, for the most essential function of prayer is communion with the sacred" (p. 86). He goes on to explain:

> [A]s researchers, we cannot determine whether people actually find and conserve a relationship with God or a higher power…. We can, however, focus on individuals' *perceptions* of a relationship with the sacred…. In empirical studies, people who report greater personal faith, attend services more often, engage in more spiritual study, and pray more regularly also score higher on measures of closeness to God, spiritual growth, and spiritual well-being (e.g., Ellison & Smith, 1991; Pargament et al., 1990). These studies suggest that spiritual pathways [like prayer] may impact people spiritually as well as psychologically, socially, and physically. (p. 91)

In my experience with members of the congregation, people's spiritual needs, along with their physical, social, and psychological needs, rose to the forefront during the beginning of the

COVID-19 pandemic. A longing seemed to ignite within them that caused them to want to share in Shabbat and holiday services more than they ever had before. They described feeling pulled to listen to and even read or sing along with the prayers of our tradition, a desire they did not remember feeling (or feeling so strongly) before. From what I witnessed, spiritual longings of members during the pandemic did not manifest in the form of study or acts of kindness, but in the form of communal worship. In this study, I am trying to discover whether those spiritual longings may have also manifested in the form of personal prayer.

The Experience of Prayer as Inwardness

Of course, as has been noted, there are many ways of thinking about and describing prayer, and sometimes new understandings of prayer can be sparked by older sources. Freud, a preeminent thinker in the fields of physiology, medicine, and psychology during the early twentieth century, had an ambivalent relationship with the distinct, but related idea of religion. According to Storr (1989), Sigmund Freud had an ambivalent relationship with religion.

> Freud believed that religion originated in man's feelings of helplessness…. Although he acknowledged that religion might sometimes play a part in suppressing neurotic symptoms, he firmly maintained that religious faith was a wish-fulfilling illusion. (p. 89).

However, near the end of his life, Freud published *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), in which he conceived of Moses as a radically different figure than the one presented in the Hebrew Bible and singled him out as the founder of monotheism.

Writing about Freud and his last book in the *New York Times Magazine*, Mark Edmundson (2007) explains that *Moses and Monotheism* was finished while Freud was in exile in England, near the end of his life, suffering from cancer of the jaw. Unlike some of his other

writings on God and religion, this book lifts up ideas of the Jewish faith that Freud seems to fully admire. In particular, he is taken with Judaism's adherence to belief in a God that cannot be seen. This, according to Freud, paved the way for a number of cultural advances. Edmundson notes:

> Freud's argument suggests that belief in an unseen God may prepare the ground not only for science and literature and law but also for intense introspection. Someone who can contemplate an invisible God, Freud implies, is in a strong position to take seriously the invisible, but perhaps determining, dynamics of inner life. He is in a better position to know himself. To live well, the modern individual must learn to understand himself in all his singularity. He must be able to pause and consider his own character, his desires, his inhibitions and values, his inner contradictions. And Judaism, with its commitment to one unseen God, opens the way for doing so. It gives us the gift of inwardness. (https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/09/magazine/09wwln-lede-t.html)

The "gift of inwardness" can be a gift that comes from psychoanalysis, where, in the presence of another, we can come to see ourselves more clearly. Obviously, this is what Freud espoused. But this gift of inwardness might also be discovered in prayer, where, in the presence of a force that is greater or more expansive than our limited, finite selves, we come to better know and see ourselves, and perhaps better know and see others.

For example, there have been a number of studies that look at how prayer impacts marriage. Hatch, Marks, Bitah, Lawrence, Lambert, Dollahite and Hardy (2016) discovered that religious couples who engaged in prayer together and individually were able to develop greater feelings of humility and positivity in themselves and toward their spouse and marriage. Prayer also helped them strengthen their communication and resolve conflict by giving them the ability to see themselves and their spouse with greater empathy and view their problems from a more

expansive perspective ("God's point of view"). When conflict arose, some couples used prayer as a sort of "time out," a chance to go inward and realign with their religious and spiritual values. The findings of this study indicate that spiritual pathways, like prayer, may be as effective as psychological therapies in helping some people discover an inward connection to the self.

It is worth noting that Freud wrote *Moses and Monotheism* near the end of his life when he was suffering from a physical illness and displaced from his homeland and familiar people and surroundings. It may have been that those particulars of his life caused him to be more reflective, seeking this sense of inwardness within himself. Similarly, at the start of the pandemic, many people were also struggling with illness (either their own or the illness and suffering of loved ones). While most people were not exiled from their homes, they were confined there and "exiled" from friends, family, religious communities, as well as from their normal routines. In speaking about these kinds of life stressors and challenges, Pargament (2007) explains:

> There is a deeper dimension to our problems. Illness, accident, interpersonal conflicts, divorce, layoffs, and death are more than "significant life events." They raise profound questions and disturbing questions about our place and purpose in the world and they point to the limits of our powers, and they underscore our finitude. These are, as theologian Paul Tillich (1952) put it, matters of "ultimate anxiety": the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, and the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. These deep questions call for a spiritual response. (p. 11)

It would appear that for Freud near the end of his life, and for many who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, those deeper questions about what is truly important in life led to spiritual searching, as well as spiritual responses, like prayer.

The Experience of Prayer as Transitional Phenomenon

The idea of transitional space comes from object relations theory, which puts forth the notion that people are primarily motivated by seeking and forming relationships with others. In this theory, "objects" refer to other people (usually a child's parents or primary caregivers) or a part of another person (e.g., the mother's breast). Through relationships with significant objects in their lives, infants begin to form mental representations of themselves, of the objects, and of the relationship between themselves and the objects. As the child continues to grow, these cumulative mental representations help the child to develop a sense of self, a sense of the world around them and an understanding of what their relationships with others are and can be.

Object relational theorists like Winnicott and Kohut note the important role of mirroring in the formation of mental or object representations. If infants are able to see, with relative consistency, pride or joy on their caregivers' faces, they begin to develop a sense of security and self-worth (Tyson and Tyson, 1990, p. 126). As they continue to grow, transitional objects stand in for the child's need to be in close proximity to their caregiver. Snuggling with a special blanket can provide similar feelings of safety and self-assurance that snuggling with a parent brought. This understanding comes about in what Winnicott termed "transitional space," an in-between space that is not fully of the internal/subjective realm and not fully of the external/objective but is affected and influenced by both. Ossey (2020) notes:

> Winnicott proposed that between the inner world of a person and objective reality there is an intermediary space that serves as a bridge between the two. He referred to this space as transitional space and viewed it as necessary throughout one's life. For Winnicott, the area of transitional space is the pivotal place where an individual has an opportunity to

> further develop concepts of self, express creativity, and move toward a more mature and healthier mental state. (p. 434)

Meissner (1984) described faith and religion as an amalgam of inner and external realities, thus placing numerous aspects of religious belief and practice within the bounds of what can be understood as transitional space. He cited prayer as the most personal of religious practices "in which the individual figuratively enters the transitional sphere and meets his or her God representation" (Saur and Saur, 1993, p. 56). Jones (1991) believed it was the *experience* of this meeting that characterized the transitional space of religion, transcending the binary of an internal and external world. Jones (1997) explained that religious rituals such as prayer were the practices that allowed "entrance again and again into that transforming psychological space from which renewal and creativity emerge" (p. 120).

Saur and Saur (1993) note that in his later years, Winnicott elaborated on his notion of transitional space with descriptions of playing (the child expresses creativity and delight in new experiences), the capacity to be alone (the child takes comfort in transitional objects and representations of their caregivers even when those caregivers are not present), and silent communication (with the transitional object that allows the child to think of the object as "real") that all derive from the transitional space (p. 60-61).

In their study on prayer and object relations, Saur and Saur found that play was "inherent in the experience of prayer" as described by subjects who identified themselves as religiously active. They also discovered that their subjects described personal prayer as a time where they were, perhaps, physically alone but felt a profound sense of connection with God or some power greater than themselves. While they were alone, they did not feel lonely. Finally, they noted at least four forms of silent communication that people described while praying: unspoken

conversations that arose spontaneously, as if they were speaking to a friend; non-grammatical speech, like a mantra, where the words were less important than the feelings those words evoked; bodily movements such as bowing or beating one's chest during Yom Kippur services; and physical sensations like tasting the sweetness of wine during a religious ceremony or feeling the warmth of the Shabbat candles after lighting them (Saur and Saur, p. 61-64).

Thinking about prayer as a transitional phenomenon also helps us understand one of the potential benefits of prayer. Winnicott explains that transitional phenomena are important to human development because they allow children to begin to experience the reality of the external world without the threat of *completely* relinquishing their feelings of omnipotence or control. Ossey (2020) explains:

> Transitional phenomena reclaim the person's mastery over, or at least partnership with, outer reality…. The sense of omnipotence can never be fully surrendered. Only through creative experiences transpiring in the intermediate transitional space can a semblance of control be maintained over an external and unresponsive reality. (p. 436)

This process of what Winnicott referred to as "reality acceptance" continues throughout our lives. While we leave behind transitional objects such as blankets and teddy bears, we can turn to intangible transitional phenomena, like prayer. Again, Ossey (2020) writes:

> The apparent omnipotence of nature, that not only refutes any vestiges of self-omnipotence, but also threatens any sense of independent control over destiny, is also eroded by the utility of prayer. Not only is the course of nature no longer immutable, but it is subject to modification through personal prayer. (p. 443)

Thus, prayer can return to us some measure of control in an uncertain and sometimes threatening world. In the face of the uncontrollable, prayer can supply a sense of personal

independence and self-determination which are "hallmark[s] of psychological health," according to Winnicott (as cited in Ossey, 2020, p. 443).

For example, it is interesting to note that one of Judaism's central prayers for the High Holy Days, the *Unetaneh Tokef*, speaks of this dual nature of reality. The prayer identifies God as the arbiter of "who shall live and who shall die" in the coming year. If we depersonalize the prayer (meaning that instead of God acting as judge and jury of who will thrive and who will perish), we can read it as an honest depiction of the fact that we, as humans, cannot possibly know what the coming year will bring. Will our lives be upended by natural disasters? Or a pandemic? Will we achieve success? Will we face loss? Will we be healed? It is impossible to know. After experiencing the randomness with which the COVID-19 virus seemed to attack people at the beginning of the pandemic, and the completely unpredictable ways in which it affected people, this prayer, during the High Holy Days of 2020 seemed to take on a new, personal meaning for many. However, the prayer ends with these words: "repentance, prayer and righteous giving mitigate the severity of the decree." This can be interpreted to mean that spiritual practices such as seeking forgiveness, donating to help others, and engaging in prayer might help us weather life's unpredictable realities by helping us sense the agency we still have in our own lives. During the pandemic, when so much of a person's life felt beyond their control, prayer may have been the transitional phenomenon that helped people feel less helpless and more in control.

Psychological Benefits of Prayer

Along with gaining a sense of control over parts of life that sometimes feel uncontrollable, research has discovered numerous benefits that prayer can bring to a person's

life. Overall, prayer is seen as a practice that aids in coping with stressful events. Pargament (2007) notes that "80% of a national sample in the United States indicates that they pray when faced with a problem or crisis" (p. 98).

In his article, *Prayer as Coping: A Psychological Analysis*, Murray Levine (2008) lays out multiple reasons for prayer's positive impact. These include the notion that putting thoughts, worries, or concerns into words can help bring some clarity to a situation that feels overwhelming. There is also the idea that "perceived support" from God "may be sufficient to relieve distress even if a prayer is not directly answered" (p. 84). Levine notes that prayer can been seen as an active form of coping, especially when no other course of action is available. This is true regarding prayers offered on behalf of oneself and on behalf of others. Levine states, "The offer to pray at once expresses emotional support to the person in need and alleviates the helplessness the one who offers to pray feels in the face of need" (p. 87). When one is facing difficulties that cannot be easily resolved, surrendering the problem to God through prayer can be seen as a mentally healthy coping strategy. In essence, one pauses from wrestling with a difficulty, leaving space for new ideas and approaches to emerge. According to Levine, prayer helps to align people with their values. It also has "an implicit, if not explicit, future oriented assumption that no matter how desperate the present, God can make it different in the future. Thus, the act of praying generates a future orientation and hope" (p. 88). Prayer can bring about physical sensations of peacefulness and relaxation, which can help ease tension and distress. Finally, Levine explains that petitionary prayers may be about more than a specific request. They may also include

> an acknowledgement of one's need for God's help whether to deal with a dilemma in living, or a desire to be up to the task at hand…. Prayer may help because the language of

> the petition may induce the corresponding feelings, or at least the implicit belief, that strength is a possibility for the person facing adversity or challenge. (p. 90)

Rokach and Brock (1997) assert that prayer, when seen as a way of maintaining one's relationship with God, can provide a sense of companionship that mitigates feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, Rokach, Chin, and Sha'ked (2012) found that the greater role religion plays in one's life, the more likely one will turn to prayer and report decreased feelings of loneliness.

Beyond prayer's potential efficacy when coping with stressful experiences, prayer has other benefits as well. Maltby, Lewis, and Day (2008) discovered that the frequency with which one engages in meditative prayer had a positive correlation with subjective well-being and general life satisfaction. Frequency of prayer has also been linked with decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression (Boelens, Reeves, Replogle and Koenig, 2009). Kraal, Sharifian, Zaheed, Sol, and Zahodne (2019) found that "religious attendance and private prayer were independently associated with better cognitive health among diverse older adults" (p. 868). In their comprehensive literature review of prayer research, Froese and Jones (2021) note additional cognitive benefits that can come from prayer including positive effects on memory and a slowing down of some of the neurological damage that comes with aging (Newberg and Waldman, 2009). They also cite some physical benefits that have been associated with the experience of praying including decreased heart rates, reduction in muscle tension, and slower breath while people engaged in reflective or meditative prayer (McCullough, 1995). They share that frequency of prayer is positively related to volunteerism and charitable giving, whether or not one belongs to a formal house of worship (Brooks 2007).

Of course, as was noted briefly above, prayer can also sometimes result in negative emotions or experiences (Whittington and Scher, 2010). Froese and Jones (2021) assert that what one believes to be the purpose of one's prayers, along with the "felt emotional experience of prayer" (p.2) by the one who is praying are key to understanding whether an individual will feel that prayer is beneficial in their lives. They write: "Emotion could form (a) the connection between the prayer experience and prayer outcomes, and (b) explain why individuals return to the prayer experience on a regular basis" (p. 11). They also look at where and to "whom" one's prayers are directed and emphasize that the image one has of God / a Divine Other will greatly impact whether prayer reduces or heightens anxiety, pain, or fear. Many of the benefits of prayer described above are dependent upon whether one has a positive view of God, making one's internal representation of God a key factor to consider in the role and outcome of prayer.

God Representations

As previously defined, prayer encompasses various forms of communication and connections between people and a Divine Other, most commonly referred to as God. Therefore, in exploring prayer from a psychological point of view it is important to briefly explore how people understand God's role and presence (or lack thereof) in their lives.

According to St. Clair (2004), "what we know about relationships between people can supply insight into how we shape our relationship with God and the sacred" (p. 11). He goes on to explain:

> The process of becoming a self begins in the family. Not only does the family environment nurture the sense of self in a child by means of images of self and other, there also occurs the development of images of God. In the interpersonal world of very

> early human relationships the groundwork is laid for the relationship with God. The image of God is a special kind of object representation. (p. 11)

Ana-Maria Rizzuto (2007) theorizes that children develop their God representations in this transitional space. This means that God representations are formed by a multitude of experiences and relationships, some stemming from the external/objective world and some stemming from the internal/subjective world. While a child's relationships with their parents are of primary importance in forming a God image (i.e., Does the child observe their parents participating in religious acts, such as prayer? Exhibiting kindness within the home? Involving the child in ritual or prayer?), they are not the only source of how our God representations come to be. Other influential and emotional relationships with people such as grandparents, religious leaders and teachers also contribute to our images of God, as do significant life experiences and our own internal feelings and sense of knowing. In explaining Rizzuto's theory, St. Clair (2004) notes:

> Rizzuto focused on the formation of an individual's private representation of God during childhood and its modifications and uses during the entire course of life. She calls this process of formation the "Birth of the Living God." What is born is a new original representation which has elements that serve to soothe and comfort and provide inspiration and courage far beyond that inspired by the actual parents on whom the image may have been based originally…. The process is something like this. A three-year-old pre-oedipal child, for example, has great curiosity and wants to know the why of everything. She is epically interested in the causes of things. Why do trees move? Where does the wind come from? How are babies made? How were mommy and daddy made? Her ceaseless chaining of causes – animistic notions of causality – inevitably leads her to

> think of a superior being. The idea of God suits a child well because her parents and adults are already in her mind superior beings of great size and power. The child easily moves to an anthropomorphic understanding of God as a powerful being like her parents, only greater. (p. 21-22)

Interestingly, the Rabbis of the Midrash imagine Abraham going through a similar process as a child to arrive at his understanding of a personal God. In *Bet ha-Midrash*, chapter 2, it is written that at the age of three, Abraham asked himself the question, "Who created the heavens and earth and me?" He looked up at the sun and, imagining that it was the creative force, he worshipped it all day. That night when the moon came out, he thought it must be stronger than the sun. So he worshipped the moon all night. When, in the morning, the sun came out again Abraham knew that there must be a God more powerful than both the sun and the moon who is responsible for creation, and he devoted himself to serving this God.

According to St. Clair, this sense of knowing God comes from our God representations. Reading numerous theological understandings of God or listening to a religious institution's claims regarding God help us form an intellectual God concept. St. Clair explains that a God representation "is made up of images, feelings and memories from early childhood. This God, from its multiple causes, has an emotional claim on us that the more conscious, conceptual God doesn't" (p. 23). This emotional claim is part of what gives our connections with our God representation the same dynamic energy that we have in our personal relationships.

Praying to Whom

From her investigations and research, Rizzuto (2007) concluded that the God representations we develop in our earliest years continue to affect us into our adult lives, whether

we are consciously aware of these effects or not. This notion is the basis for research that has been conducted over the past twenty years looking at God as a potential attachment figure. Attachment theory, founded by John Bowlby and furthered by many researchers including Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main, began by focusing on the relationship between infants and their primary caregivers. Attachment was seen as an evolutionary function allowing a helpless infant to gain security and life's necessities from their caregivers. Based on research, four main attachment styles have been identified (Wallin, 2015, pp. 84-98).

Secure attachment exists when there are feelings of love, closeness and ease of connection with the attachment figure. Those feelings remain consistent even when the child and caregiver face separation. During those times, securely attached individuals

> routinely display "proximity-seeking" behaviors toward their attachment figures – that is, they seek their company and protection, particularly during stressful times. Attachment figures, in turn, serve as a "safe haven" and a "secure base" in an uncertain world. (Chornobai, 2018, p. 80)

The three remaining attachment styles are all understood to be forms of insecure attachments. Avoidant attachment occurs when attachment figures are consistently perceived as distant or distracted. As a way to maintain connected to the caregiver, the child learns to avoid the appearance of needing attention from the caregiver. Anxious/ambivalent attachment occurs when the child learns to maintain connections to their caregiver by clinging to them and expressing great distress in the face of any separation. Disorganized attachment exists when connections with the caregiver are not only unreliable, but also potentially dangerous or volatile for the child. The child is left feeling completely perplexed about how to maintain connections with their caregiver and maintain their own safety.

According to Shorey and Snyder (2006) the attachment style that a person experiences as a child impacts the way that person will relate to others throughout their lives (p. 1). With this in mind, attachment researchers like Ellison, Bradshaw, Flannelly, and Galek (2014), have begun to look at God as a potential attachment figure and prayer as a proximity-seeking practice people turn to when they are feeling threatened, anxious or in need. Whether people feel a secure or insecure attachment to God can be attributed, in part, to an outgrowth of the type of attachment style they experienced as children. There are, of course, other factors that can affect one's feelings of attachment to God, including the way that God is presented within one's faith tradition. From *Avinu Malkeinu* (Our Father, Our King) in Judaism to the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father, who art in heaven") in Christianity, to numerous scriptural texts that describe God's constant caring presence, God is often referred to as a loving, protective parent in Western monotheistic faiths. If one believes that God is ever-present, can be called upon at any time and will always be there for those who call out, God could be seen as the ultimate secure attachment figure regardless of the attachment style with which a person was raised. On the other hand, there are also numerous texts in the Hebrew Bible that describe God as jealous, vengeful, and punishing. People may also have experiences of feeling disappointed, ignored, or abandoned by God in their times of need which could lead to an insecure attachment to God (Chornobai, 2018, p. 83).

In their study on attachment to God and anxiety symptoms in adults, Ellison, et al. (2014) review research indicating that individuals who feel they have a secure attachment to God report

> higher levels of life satisfaction, and with lower levels of depressed affect, psychological distress, and feelings of loneliness; on the other hand, anxious attachment to God has

> been found to be inversely associated with positive affect, and positively linked with distress and neuroticism. (p. 213)

These same researchers also report, from their own study, that "persons who pray often to a God who is perceived as a secure attachment figure derive clear mental health benefits, while those who pray to a God who is perceived as distant or unresponsive experience elevated levels of anxiety-related symptoms" (Ellison, et al., 2014, p. 226).

How one views God and one's relationship with God seems to be a defining factor in how people experience prayer. If God is perceived as a caring entity, the blessings that come from prayer are abundant. However, if God is perceived as judgmental, demanding, or exacting, then God, Godself, negatively affects the outcomes of prayer or becomes an obstacle to prayer altogether. Those who do not believe in God or who do not believe in a personal God, including many committed practitioners of Judaism, may also experience challenges when it comes to prayer. To "whom" do they direct their prayers? What is the purpose of prayer if one's God image is nonexistent or incompatible with being in relationship? While these questions are important and warrant further investigation, they are beyond the scope of this current study.

Psychological Obstacles to Prayer

Beyond one's image of God or lack thereof, there are other psychological obstacles to cultivating a personal prayer practice. If prayer is an experience to not only express awe and gratitude, but also to petition God for help for others and for the self, people must be able to acknowledge that 1) they do sometimes need help and 2) they are worthy of being helped. The notion that someone might not be able to handle things all on their own or need to request and rely upon the help of others or God can lead to feelings of embarrassment and unworthiness. In

their study on shame and Jewish identity, Kaufman and Raphael (1987) explain that "Americans are … pressed to be independent and self-sufficient – as reflected in the American mythic figures of pioneer, cowboy and detective. In such a climate, needing becomes a sign of inadequacy" (p. 34). People who, consciously or unconsciously, accept these myths will likely be resistant to acknowledging their own needs and expressing those needs in prayer to God.

As a rabbi, I often meet with congregants to discuss their personal concerns and well-being. Once, in meeting with a seemingly confident congregant who was having a difficult time health-wise, I asked if she ever considered turning to God in prayer. She responded by telling me that she prays all the time for other people, but she cannot pray for herself. When I asked her why she told me that there were so many other people who needed God more than she did. I responded with another question – did she not believe that God could handle hearing her prayers as well as the prayers of others? She told me she did not believe her problems were "worthy of God's time." While heartbreaking, this is an example of one of the many ways people can be rejecting of help, even "from God," as well as one of the ways that people make up "rules" about what they can and cannot pray about.

Just as feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness can become obstacles to prayer, so can feelings of shame. Brown (2010) defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging" (p. 39). Lewis (1992) notes that the "phenomenological experience of the person having shame is that of a wish to hide, disappear or die" (p. 75). Psalm 139 expresses the notion that God sees us in all our glory and all our flaws. For some, these words are comforting, expressing the notion that God is always close by regardless of how we may be feeling at any given time. But for those plagued by

shame, who cannot stomach the thought of being seen as imperfect or flawed, these words and the notion of opening oneself up to God in prayer can induce stress and even fear.

Confessional prayers, where people admit to wrongdoings and seek atonement and which are an integral part of many faith traditions, can also be cause for shame. On Yom Kippur, the majority of the liturgy consists of these kinds of confessional prayers. The ancient rabbis seemed to intuitively know that shame over wrongdoings could be an obstacle to prayer for some people. Therefore, they formulated these confessional prayers in the first-person plural (i.e., "For the ways that *we* have sinned against You, O God, by …"). The entire congregation recites the prayers together so that no one has to feel singled out or ashamed. But within the recesses of one's individual mind and heart, it may be more difficult to be honest and confess one's faults. If a person cannot be honest in prayer, they may feel that it is hypocritical to pray at all.

Finally, fear of being disappointed by God or actually feeling disappointed by God can get in the way of people not only developing a prayer practice but actually praying at all. In my role as rabbi, I encounter many congregants who feel this way. Though many people turn to prayer in times of great suffering, there are others who, in the midst of their pain, blame God for or question God's role in their pain. They believe they cannot engage in prayer because they are angry with God or have been incredibly hurt by what they perceive to be God's lack of response to their suffering and pain. "Why should I pray?" they ask. "All the treatments failed." Or they will explain, "I prayed for a long time, but God never answered."

Hall and Edwards (2002) note that disappointment in God is associated with negative psychological states including insecure attachment, egocentricity, and decreased purpose in life. Interestingly, Paine and Sandage (2017) discovered that meditative prayer mediated some of the

negative effects that can be caused by disappointment in God, while petitionary prayer and colloquial prayer did not have any significant effect.

Spiritual and psychological obstacles to prayer are difficult to overcome. This is especially true when trying to develop a personal prayer practice. However, as will be discussed below, times of struggle, challenge, and disruption can open for people new ways of experiencing and practicing their faith tradition. Part of the scope of this study is trying to determine whether the crisis of the pandemic spurred people to begin to engage with personal prayer, and if so, have they continued to engage with the practice since the most intense part of the crisis has passed.

Faith Development

While obstacles to creating and/or sustaining a personal prayer practice are real, it is also important to note that despite these challenges, faith development theories offer notions that people of all ages can come to see and possibly embrace personal prayer. Parker (2011) describes his use of Fowler's (1981) faith development theory in counseling. He explains that, for Fowler, "faith is not so much a set of beliefs as a way of knowing, a way constructing one's experience of the world" (p. 113), and that there may be certain life events that cause people to make a transition from one stage to the next. In Fowler's fifth stage of development, known as the conjunctive phase, people are able to move beyond their need for things to make logical sense and can begin to embrace or re-embrace religious stories and symbols from their youth that take on new and deeper meanings. Parker notes that a move to this level of faith development is often brought on when there is a "loss of certitude of the logical distinctions of a previous stage" and a "loss of objective certainty and confidence in empiricism;" it is a time of "growing awareness of

the unconscious … recognition that one is both constructive and destructive without meaning to be … paradoxes must be held … [and a] commitment to justice not confined to one's tribe" (p. 118). In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, racial justice issues and a rise in white Christian nationalism have demonstrated that we did not know as much about the world as we thought we did, and that logic and rationalism alone cannot help us avert or manage these crises. New ways of understanding ourselves, the world around us and our responses to the current reality in which we find ourselves have been opened for some people, and this can include religious and spiritual practices such as personal prayer.

Parks (1986) also speaks about transitions that have the potential to be transformational. In "mid-life," which Parks defines not as a particular age but as the "inner sense that one has probably lived half of one's life" (p. 59), some people come to a deeper knowledge of their own selves and their place in the world. This inner knowing of one's mortality could come about because of a personal health concern or becoming aware of another's health crisis. Again, COVID-19 brought the notion of mortality to the forefront of people's minds for at least a short time. Alternatively, it could simply be that, upon reflection, one comes to this new stage. Parks writes:

> This transformation constitutes another qualitative shift in the balance of vulnerability, trust, and faith. Now more at home with the limitations and strengths of the self, one can be more at home with the truth embedded in the strengths and limitations of others. A person's locus of primary trust now resides neither in the assumed authority of another nor in the courageously claimed authority of the inner self. Rather, trust is now centered in the meeting of self and other, recognizing the strength and finitude of each and the

> promise of the truth that emerges in relation. This trust is the self-conscious expression of interdependence (p. 59).

Those who can embrace this stage of interdependence may discover this sense of trust through prayer, which can be thought of as a place of "the meeting of self and other." Prayer can also be a tool that continues to strengthen this sense of trust and deeper knowing that has emerged during this stage.

While faith development is a process that unfolds uniquely with each individual, faith communities can play an important role in supporting people in this spiritual unfolding. Part of this study seeks to know if this kind of support, focusing particularly on the development of a personal prayer practice, is desired by members of a synagogue community.

In Summary

Research has demonstrated that there are numerous psychological benefits associated with prayer, and that people often turn to prayer during times of crisis. This was certainly true during the extreme disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Bentzen (2021) found that during the early months of the pandemic, Google searches for prayer rose by 30% and was able to conclude that those searches were connected to personal prayer, as opposed to a search for online religious services. Prayer was found to be a positive coping mechanism to deal with fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and stress. While the crisis of the pandemic is over, people are still in need of ways of coping with the more routine disruptions of illness, loneliness, anxiety, and stress, and personal prayer may be one practice that people can continue to turn to and rely on throughout their lives.

Methodology

This study used both quantitative and qualitative assessment to study the personal prayer practices of members of a large midwestern Reform synagogue before, during, and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey (see Appendix A) was designed to gather data to both describe behavior (specifically, the personal prayer practices, or lack thereof, of participants) and, to an extent, explain this behavior.

The participants in this study were members of a large midwestern Reform congregation. The congregation is comprised of approximately 1500 member families. There are numerous assumptions one could make about whether these members regularly engage in personal prayer, why they may do so, and what challenges they encounter when it comes to personal prayer. The truth is, however, that honest discussions about personal prayer rarely occur in the synagogue setting. Also, personal prayer practices are difficult to observe. Therefore, using a survey to collect self-reported data and analyzing that data in a grounded research approach is the most helpful way to study the questions posed at the beginning of this paper. Those questions are:

- Did the members of a midwestern Reform congregation engage in personal prayer during the onset of the COVID crisis?
- Are they continuing to engage in personal prayer now that the urgent crisis has passed?
- If they do have a personal prayer practice, what does this practice provide them?
- Do they have a yearning for or curiosity about engaging in personal prayer or developing a personal prayer practice?
- What factors get in the way of them engaging in personal prayer or developing a personal prayer practice?

The survey contained seven sections:

1. Biographical information including the age, gender, and faith tradition in which they were raised.
2. Personal prayer practices (or lack thereof) of their youth. Personal prayer was defined broadly as prayers offered on one's own distinct from congregational or communal worship.
3. Emotional states during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March – August 2020).
4. Experiences with personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March – August 2020).
5. Emotional states and experiences with personal prayer during the last six months from when they filled out the survey (May – October 2022).
6. Experiences with personal prayer during the last six months from when they filled out the survey (May – October 2022).
7. General thoughts on personal prayer including possible obstacles to personal prayer, as well as interest in learning more about engaging with personal prayer practices.

Participants were asked to reflect on their engagement with personal prayer practices near the beginning of the pandemic (March – October of 2020) when it was thought that feelings of uncertainty, worries about health and mortality, and experiences of isolation would be at their most intense. They were also asked to reflect on their engagement with personal prayer practices during the most recent six months from the time they were completing the survey. While COVID-19 was still a concern in 2022, vaccines (including boosters) had been introduced, in-person schooling and gatherings had resumed, mask mandates had been rescinded, and overall anxiety about the virus was far less than it had been at the beginning of the pandemic.

Participants were notified of an opportunity to fill out this survey in three ways:

1 – An announcement about the survey appeared in the congregation's monthly bulletin (see Appendix B).

2 – This same announcement appeared in the congregation's weekly email announcements two weeks prior to the release of the survey.

3 – An email (see Appendix C) containing a link to the survey was sent to the members of the congregation on the day the survey opened. It remained open for two weeks. A reminder email (see Appendix D) was sent to these same members one week after the survey opened.

The anonymous survey was distributed to all members of the congregation for whom there is a current email address. That number totals 2,049 email addresses. The survey was created using Google Forms, a web-based application to administer surveys. Participants accessed the survey through a shareable link and responses were collected in a Google Sheets document. Five hundred and twenty-four people (26%) responded to the survey. The responses were analyzed using graphical analysis and other methods. For the two qualitative open-ended questions, machine learning was used to identify keyword themes and produce word cloud images.

Results

Biographical Information and Childhood Experiences with Personal Prayer

The survey was sent to 2049 individual email addresses. The total number of people who responded to the survey was 524 (26%). The beginning of the survey was comprised of a small number of biographical questions, as well as questions pertaining to how respondents may or may not have related to personal prayer during their childhoods. The respondents ranged in age from their twenties through their eighties, with a little over half of the respondents falling between the ages of 60 to over 80. Two-thirds of the respondents were female, and 90% of the respondents were raised in a Jewish home. A slight majority of the respondents (252 people, 48%) were raised in a home where family members did not engage in personal prayer, while 199 respondents (38%) were raised in a home where family members did engage in personal prayer. A majority of the respondents (303 people, 58%) did engage in personal prayer at least once or twice a week when they were children, while 221 of the respondents (42%) did not engage at all in personal prayer when they were children. For 200 of the respondents (38%), no one taught them how to pray when they were children; 220 of the respondents (42%) learned to engage in personal prayer from a parent, and 185 of the respondents (35%) learned to pray from a clergy person.

Based on a multivariate correlation analysis, there was a positive correlation at the 99.9% statistical confidence level ($r = 0.20$, $p < .0001$) between someone who was raised in a home where family members engaged in personal prayer and the frequency with which someone prayed during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as during the most recent six months from the time of their taking the survey (Figure 1). There was also a positive correlation at the 99.9% statistical confidence level ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.0001$) between the frequency with which they,

themselves, prayed as a child and the frequency with which they prayed as an adult both during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and during the most recent six months (Figure 2).

Figure 1 – Correlations Between People Raised in a Home Where Family Members Engaged in Personal Prayer and the Frequencies of People Praying at the Onset and Two Years into the COVID-19 Pandemic

Multivariate

Correlations

	FamilyPrayerCode	11. Covid Prayer	28 Post Covid Prayer
FamilyPrayerCode	1.0000	0.2002	0.2273
11. Covid Prayer	0.2002	1.0000	0.8159
28 Post Covid Prayer	0.2273	0.8159	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

	FamilyPrayerCode	11. Covid Prayer	28 Post Covid Prayer
FamilyPrayerCode	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
11. Covid Prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
28 Post Covid Prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Figure 2 – Correlations Between the Frequency of People Engaged in Personal Prayer as Children and the Frequencies of People Praying at the Onset and Two Years into the COVID-19 Pandemic

Correlations

	Q6 prayer freq as child	Q11 freq prayer	Spiritual Life Past 6 mo Q28 Freq engaged
Q6 prayer freq as child	1.0000	0.3892	0.3667
Q11 freq prayer	0.3892	1.0000	0.8159
Spiritual Life Past 6 mo Q28 Freq engaged	0.3667	0.8159	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

	Q6 prayer freq as child	Q11 freq prayer	Spiritual Life Past 6 mo Q28 Freq engaged
Q6 prayer freq as child	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
Q11 freq prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
Spiritual Life Past 6 mo Q28 Freq engaged	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Emotional States of Participants

The survey also contained questions asking respondents to reflect upon their emotional states during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during the most recent

six months (May-October 2022). Specifically, respondents were asked how often they experienced anxiety, grief, happiness, and feeling alone during these two different six-month periods of time. These questions were posed to try to learn whether people were more likely to turn to prayer when they were experiencing negative emotional states.

Based on a multivariate correlation analysis there is a positive correlation at the 99.9% statistical confidence level between how often people felt anxious ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.0001$), how often they felt alone ($r = .15$, $p < 0.0001$), and how often they experienced grief ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.0001$) during the first six months of the pandemic with how frequently they engaged in personal prayer during the first six months of the pandemic. There was a negative correlation between how often people felt happy and how often they engaged in personal prayer during the first six months of the pandemic that was not statistically significant ($r = -0.005$, $p = 0.8995$) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Correlations Between Emotional States and the Frequency of Prayer During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Multivariate

Correlations

	6. child prayer	7.anxiety Covid	8. Alone Covid	9. happy Covid	10. Grief Covid	11. Covid Prayer	12. Connection God Covid	13. Connection Covid
6. child prayer	1.0000	0.1567	0.1237	-0.0128	0.1355	0.3892	0.3277	0.2854
7.anxiety Covid	0.1567	1.0000	0.4520	-0.4354	0.4431	0.1936	0.1655	0.1464
8. Alone Covid	0.1237	0.4520	1.0000	-0.3814	0.3571	0.1397	0.1490	0.1240
9. happy Covid	-0.0128	-0.4354	-0.3814	1.0000	-0.2771	-0.0055	0.0303	0.0019
10. Grief Covid	0.1355	0.4431	0.3571	-0.2771	1.0000	0.1601	0.1627	0.1475
11. Covid Prayer	0.3892	0.1936	0.1397	-0.0055	0.1601	1.0000	0.7098	0.6345
12. Connection God Covid	0.3277	0.1655	0.1490	0.0303	0.1627	0.7098	1.0000	0.7172
13. Connection Covid	0.2854	0.1464	0.1240	0.0019	0.1475	0.6345	0.7172	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

	6. child prayer	7.anxiety Covid	8. Alone Covid	9. happy Covid	10. Grief Covid	11. Covid Prayer	12. Connection God Covid	13. Connection Covid
6. child prayer	<.0001	0.0003	0.0046	0.7702	0.0019	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
7.anxiety Covid	0.0003	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.0001	0.0008
8. Alone Covid	0.0046	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.0013	0.0006	0.0045
9. happy Covid	0.7702	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.8995	0.4886	0.9663
10. Grief Covid	0.0019	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.0002	0.0002	0.0007
11. Covid Prayer	<.0001	<.0001	0.0013	0.8995	0.0002	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
12. Connection God Covid	<.0001	0.0001	0.0006	0.4886	0.0002	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
13. Connection Covid	<.0001	0.0008	0.0045	0.9663	0.0007	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

The multivariate correlation analysis also indicated a positive correlation at the 99.9% statistical confidence level between how often people felt anxious ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.0001$), how often they felt alone ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.0001$), and how often they experienced grief ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.0001$), during the most recent six months from when they filled out the survey (May-October 2022) with how frequently they engaged in personal prayer during this same period of time. There was a negative correlation between how often people felt happy and how often they engaged in personal prayer during the most recent six months from when they filled out the survey that was not statistically significant ($r = -0.02$, $p = 0.6415$) (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Correlations Between Emotional States and the Frequency of Prayer from May – October 2022

Correlations

	Spiritual Life Past Q24 Anxiety	Spiritual Life Past Q25 Alone	Spiritual Life Past Q26 Happy	Spiritual Life Past Q27 Grief	Spiritual Life Past Q28 engaged
Spiritual Life Past Q24 Anxiety	1.0000	0.4836	-0.4635	0.4130	0.1533
Spiritual Life Past Q25 Alone	0.4836	1.0000	-0.4516	0.3921	0.1589
Spiritual Life Past Q26 Happy	-0.4635	-0.4516	1.0000	-0.3460	-0.0204
Spiritual Life Past Q27 Grief	0.4130	0.3921	-0.3460	1.0000	0.1589
Spiritual Life Past Q28 engaged	0.1533	0.1589	-0.0204	0.1589	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

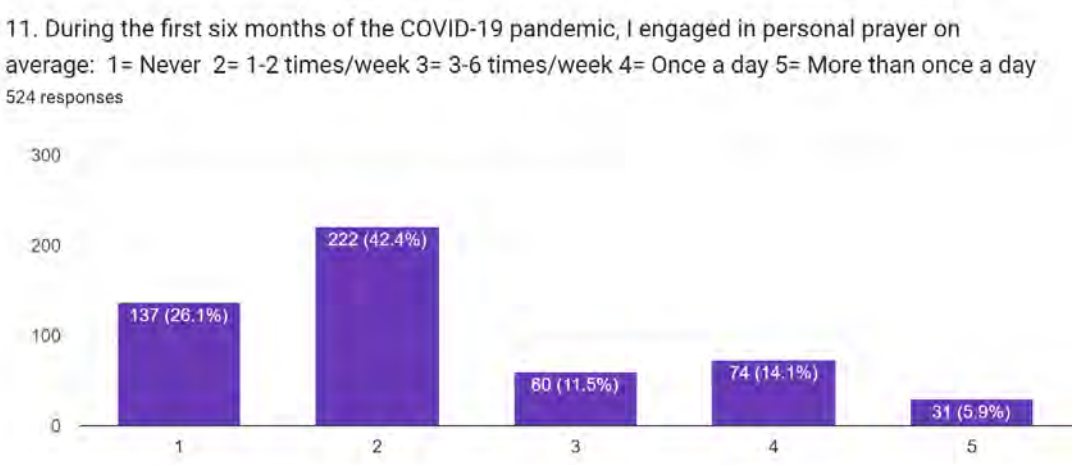
	Spiritual Life Past Q24 Anxiety	Spiritual Life Past Q25 Alone	Spiritual Life Past Q26 Happy	Spiritual Life Past Q27 Grief	Spiritual Life Past Q28 engaged
Spiritual Life Past Q24 Anxiety	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.0004
Spiritual Life Past Q25 Alone	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.0003
Spiritual Life Past Q26 Happy	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.6415
Spiritual Life Past Q27 Grief	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	0.0003
Spiritual Life Past Q28 engaged	0.0004	0.0003	0.6415	0.0003	<.0001

Frequency of Personal Prayer During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first question this study explored is whether members of a large, midwestern Reform congregation engaged in personal prayer during the onset of the COVID crisis. This study demonstrates that the majority of people who responded to the survey did engage in personal prayer during the first six months of the pandemic; 387 members (74%) engaged in some sort of personal prayer practice at least once or twice a week during the beginning of the pandemic, while 137 (26%) people responded that they did not engage in personal prayer at all during the

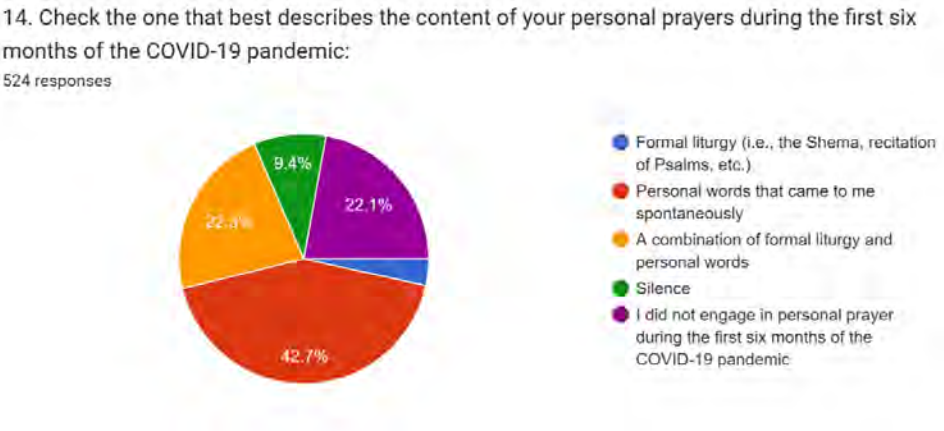
first six months of the pandemic (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Frequency of Personal Prayer During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic



When asked to describe the content of their prayers during the first six months of the pandemic, 224 people (42.7%) responded that their prayers consisted of personal words that came to them spontaneously, while 117 people (22.3%) responded that their prayers were made up partly of personal words and partly of more formal liturgy (e.g., the words of the Shema, the Lord's Prayer, psalms). Forty-nine people (9.4%) noted that their prayers were made up mostly of silence (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – Content of Prayers During the First Six Months of the Pandemic



Participants were also asked to rate how often their prayers consisted of requests for personal health and safety, requests regarding the health and safety of others, expressions of gratitude, requests for forgiveness, requests for strength and wisdom to navigate challenges, and an openness to receive guidance, comfort, and peace. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, 277 of the respondents' personal prayers (53%) included requests for personal health and safety some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 7); 408 of the respondents' personal prayers (78%) included requests for the health and safety of others some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 8); 349 of the respondents' personal prayers (67%) included expressions of gratitude some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 9); 108 of the respondents' personal prayers (21%) included requests for forgiveness some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 10); 326 of the respondents' personal prayers (62%) included requests for strength and wisdom to navigate challenges some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 11); 277 of the respondents' personal prayers (53%) involved an openness to receive guidance, comfort, and peace some of the time, often, or every time they prayed (Figure 12).

Figure 7 – Prayers for Personal Health and Safety During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

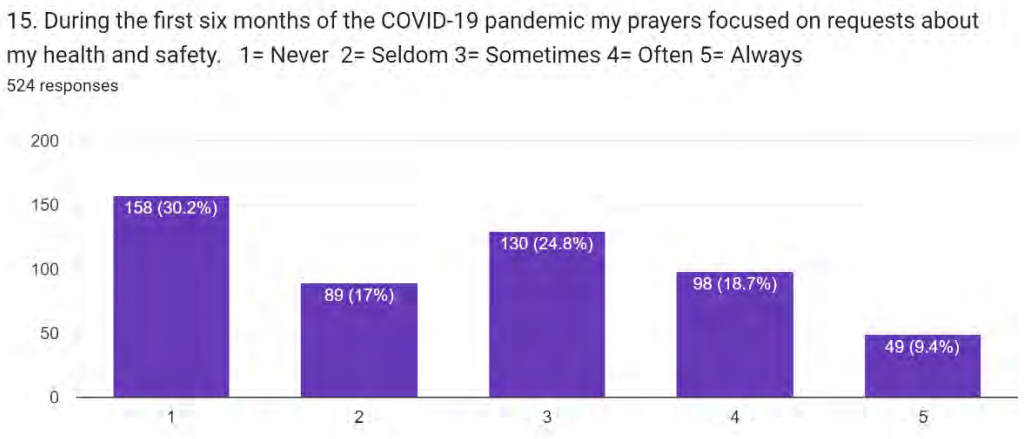


Figure 8 – Prayers for the Health and Safety of Others During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

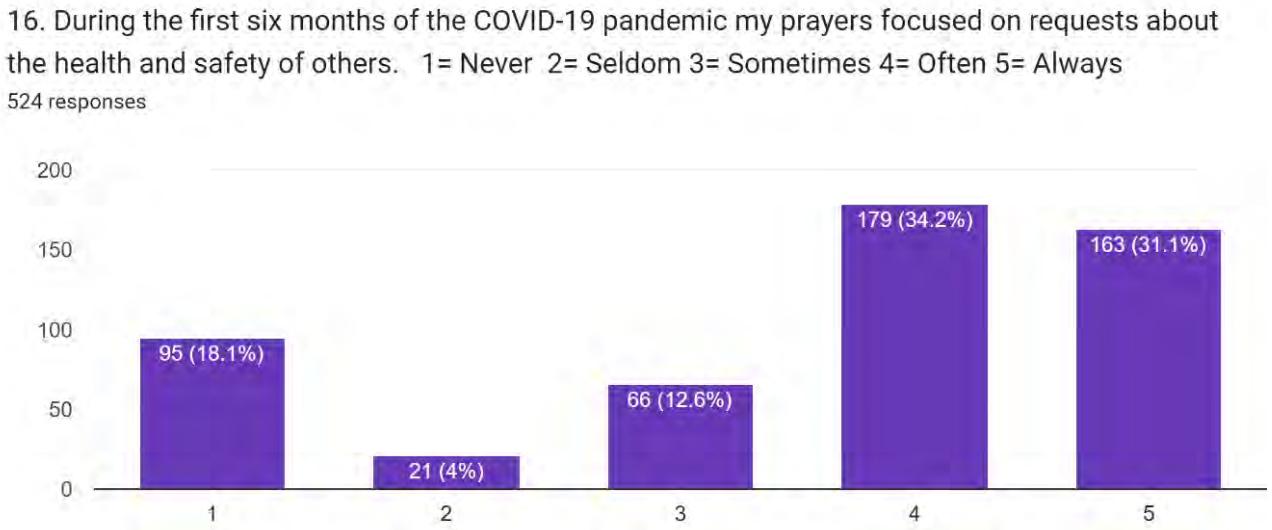


Figure 9 – Prayers of Gratitude During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

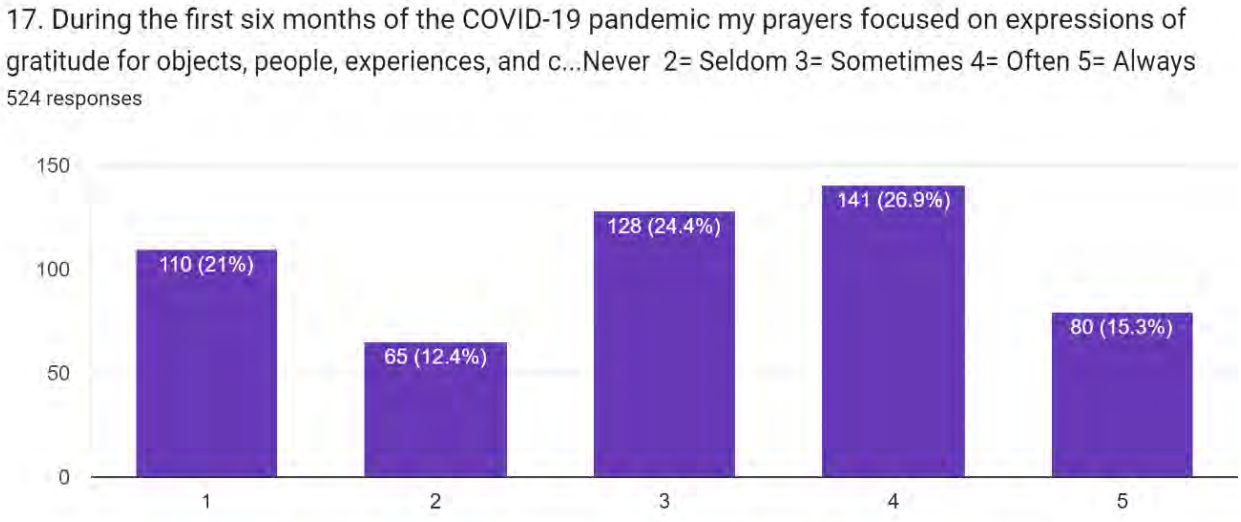


Figure 10 – Prayers of Forgiveness During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

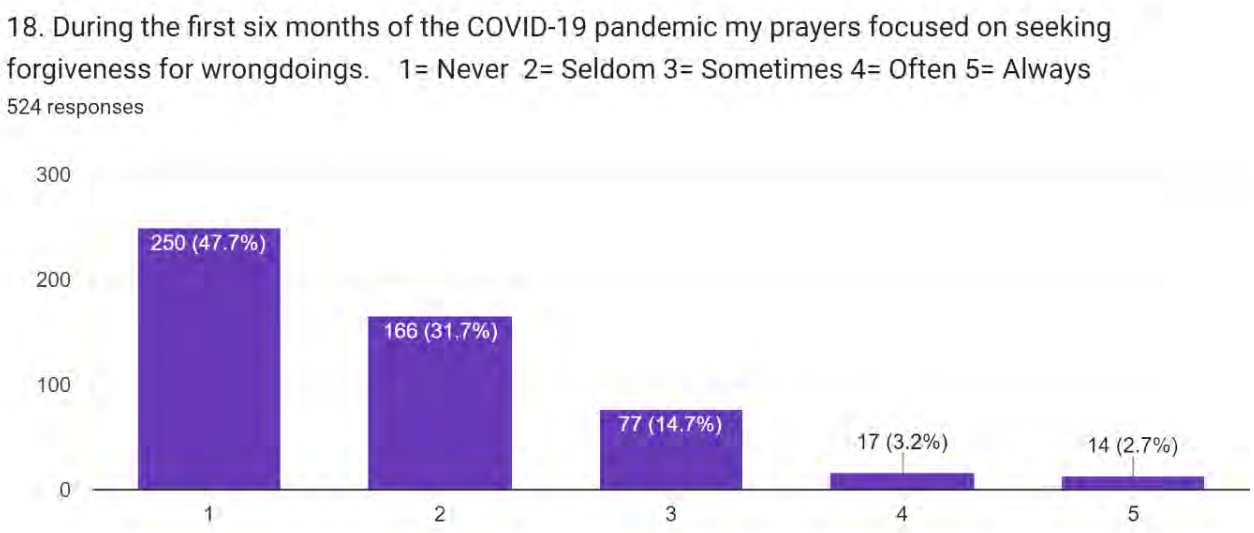


Figure 11 – Prayers for Strength and Wisdom During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

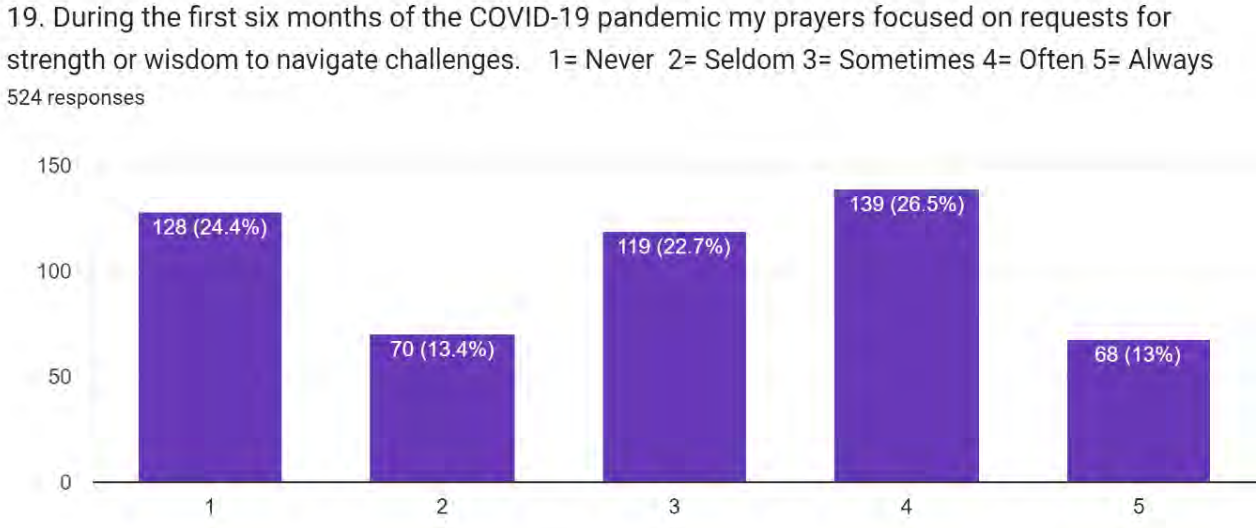
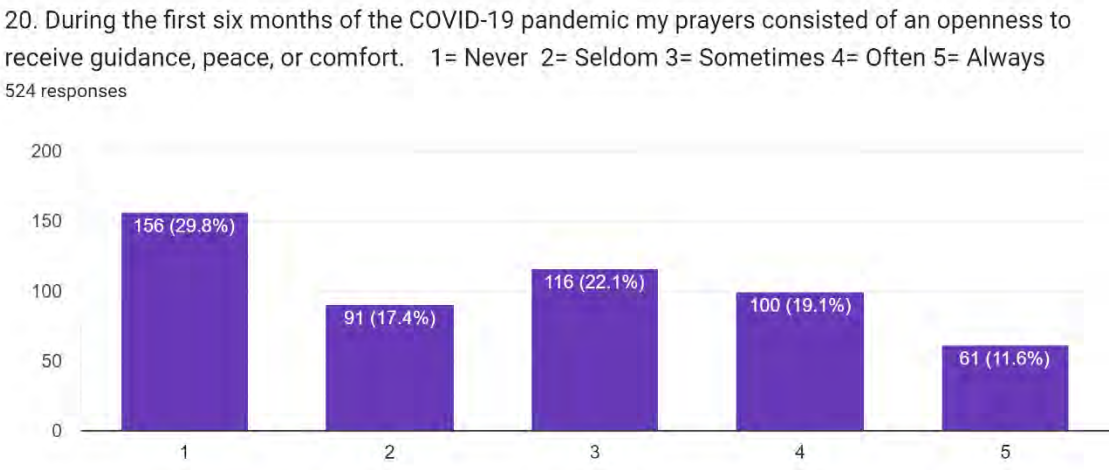


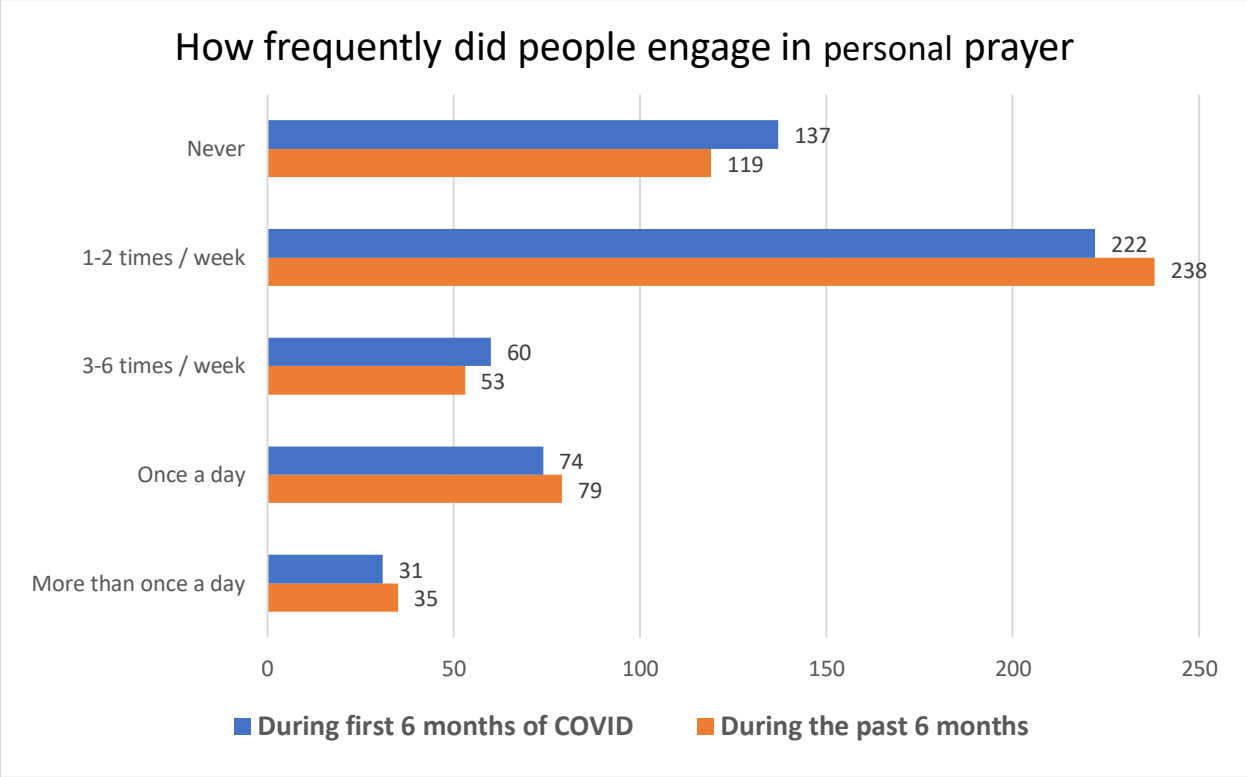
Figure 12 – Prayers with an Openness to Receive Guidance, Comfort, and Peace During the First Six Months of the Pandemic



Frequency of Personal Prayer During the Most Recent Six Months from the Time of Taking the Survey

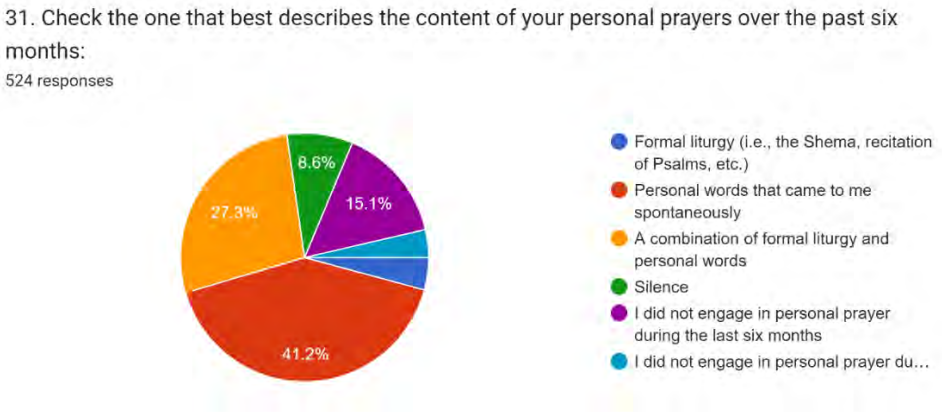
The second issue this study set out to explore was whether the members of a large, midwestern, Reform congregation were continuing to engage in personal prayer approximately two years after the intensity of the COVID crisis had passed (May-October 2022). The majority of the people who responded to the survey reported that they did engage in personal prayer during this period of time. In fact, a slightly larger number of people reported engaging in personal prayer in May-October 2022 than when the crisis began. There were 405 people (77%) who engaged in personal prayer at least once or twice a week during this time (compared to 387 people at the onset of the pandemic). The number of people who did not engage in personal prayer at all decreased slightly, with 119 (23%) people responding that they did not engage in personal prayer at all during this time (Figure 13).

Figure 13 – Frequency of Prayer Engagement in the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic as Compared to the Frequency of Prayer Engagement from May – October 2022



When asked to describe the content of their prayers during the period of time from May-October 2022, 216 people (41.2%) responded that their prayers consisted of personal words that come to them spontaneously, while 143 people (27.3%) responded that their prayers were made up partly of personal words and partly of more formal liturgy (e.g., the words of the Shema, the Lord's Prayer, psalms). Forty-five people (8.6%) noted that their prayers were made up mostly of silence (Figure 14).

Figure 14 – Content of Prayers from May – October 2022



Participants were also asked to rate how often their prayers consisted of requests for personal health and safety, requests regarding the health and safety of others, expressions of gratitude, requests for forgiveness, requests for strength and wisdom to navigate challenges, and an openness to receive guidance, comfort and peace. During this period of time (May-October 2022), 257 of the respondents' personal prayers (49%) included requests for personal health and safety some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 15); 410 of the respondents' personal prayers (78%) included requests for the health and safety of others some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 16); 375 of the respondents' personal prayers (71.5%) included expressions of gratitude some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 17); 184 of the respondents' personal prayers (35%) included requests for forgiveness some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 18); 347 of the respondents' personal prayers (66%) included requests for strength and wisdom to navigate challenges some of the time, often, or all of the time (Figure 19); 310 of the respondents' personal prayers (59%) involved an openness to receive guidance, comfort, and peace some of the time, often, or every time they prayed (Figure 20).

Figure 15 – Prayers for Personal Health and Safety During the Most Recent Six Months

Figure 16 – Prayers for the Health and Safety of Others During the Most Recent Six Months

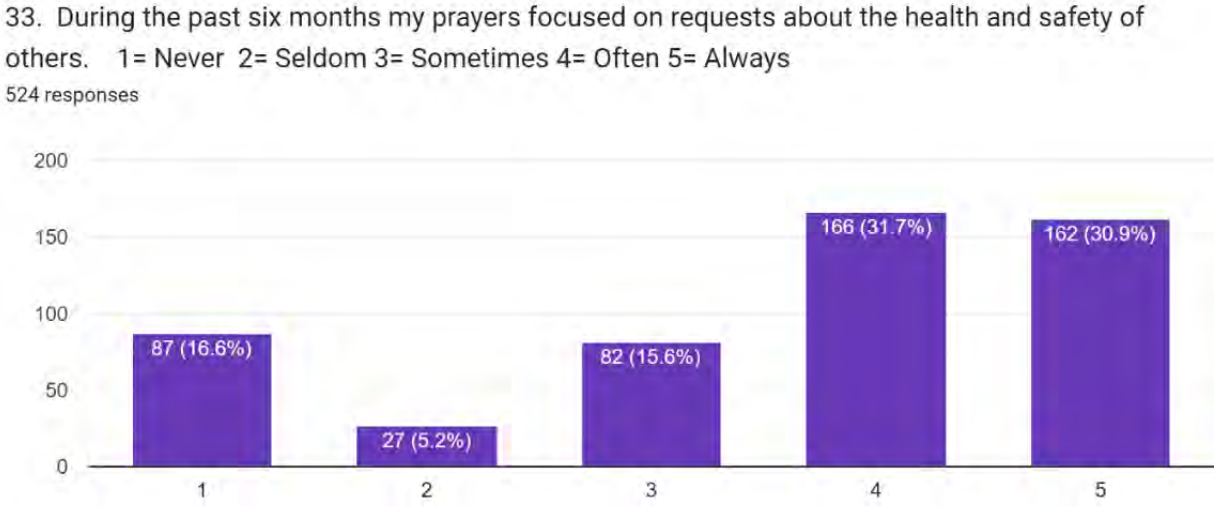


Figure 17 – Prayers for Gratitude During the Most Recent Six Months

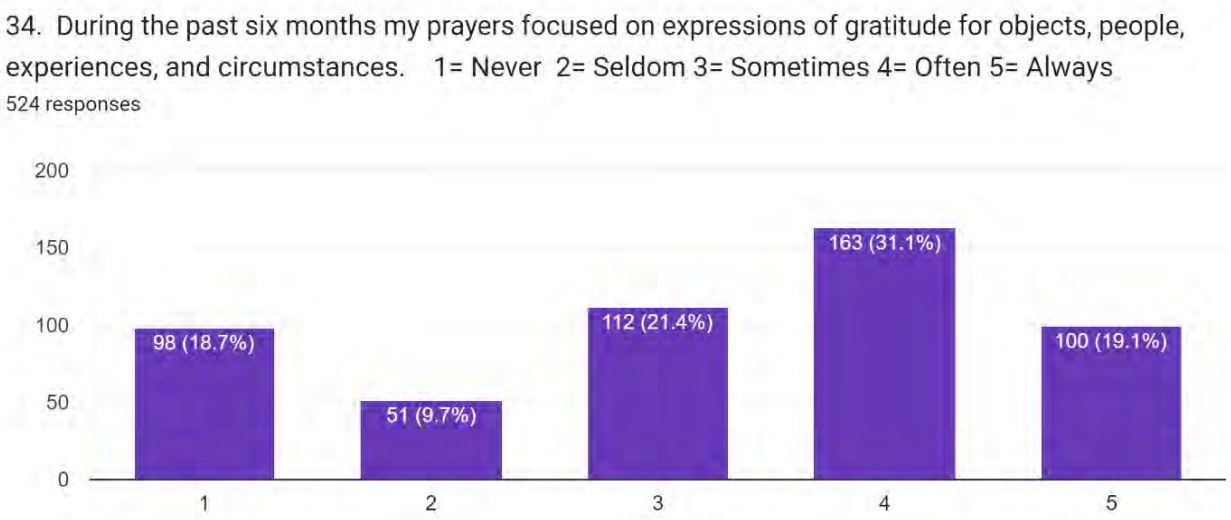


Figure 18 – Prayers for Forgiveness During the Most Recent Six Months

Figure 19 – Prayers for Strength and Wisdom During the Most Recent Six Months

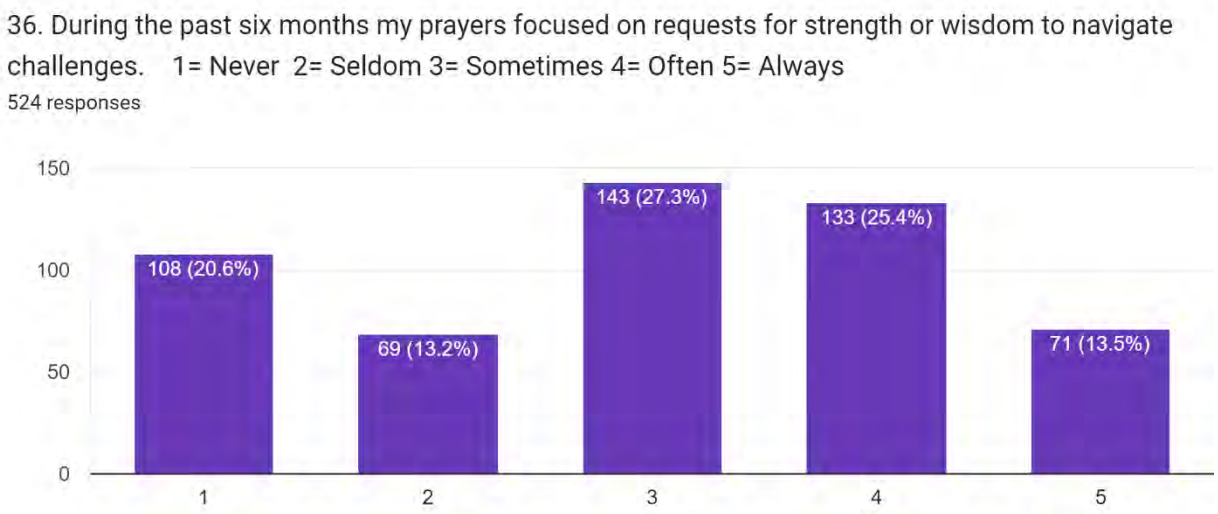
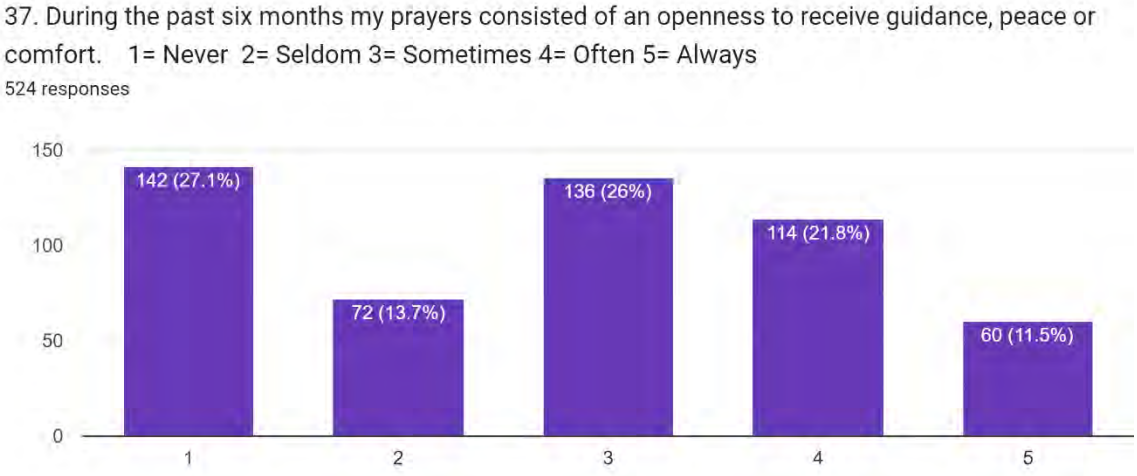


Figure 20 – Prayers with an Openness to Receive Guidance, Comfort, and Peace During the Most Recent Six Months



Perceived Benefits of Personal Prayer

The third issue this study investigated was the perceived benefits of personal prayer by those who engage in the practice. Respondents had an opportunity to reflect on what benefits they believed they received by engaging in personal prayer during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during the most recent six months (May-October 2022) when the most severe health concerns of the pandemic had eased.

Question #12 asked participants how often they felt a connection with God, the Divine or a Higher Power when they engaged in personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. While engaging in prayer may not be the cause of feeling a connection to God, feeling connected to God during prayer can be understood as a benefit of a prayer practice. Exactly half of the respondents (262) indicated that they sometimes, often, or always felt a connection with God when they prayed during the first six months of the pandemic. There were 164 respondents (31.3%) who indicated that they never felt a connection with God when they engaged in personal prayer during this time. Of these 164 respondents, 137 people responded that they had not prayed at all during the first six months of the pandemic (Question #11). Therefore, 27 people did not feel any connection to God when they prayed during this time (Figure 21). Question #29 asked participants how often they felt a connection with God, the Divine or a Higher Power when they engaged in personal prayer during the period of May through October of 2022. During this time period, 273 people (52%) reported feeling close to God sometimes, often, or always when they prayed, while 145 people (28%) indicated that they never felt close to God when they prayed during this time (Figure 22). Of these 145 people, 119 responded that they had not prayed at all during the period of time from May through October 2022 (Question #28). Therefore, 26 people did not feel any connection to God when they prayed

during this period of time.

Figure 21- Connecting to God Through Prayer During Personal Prayer at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

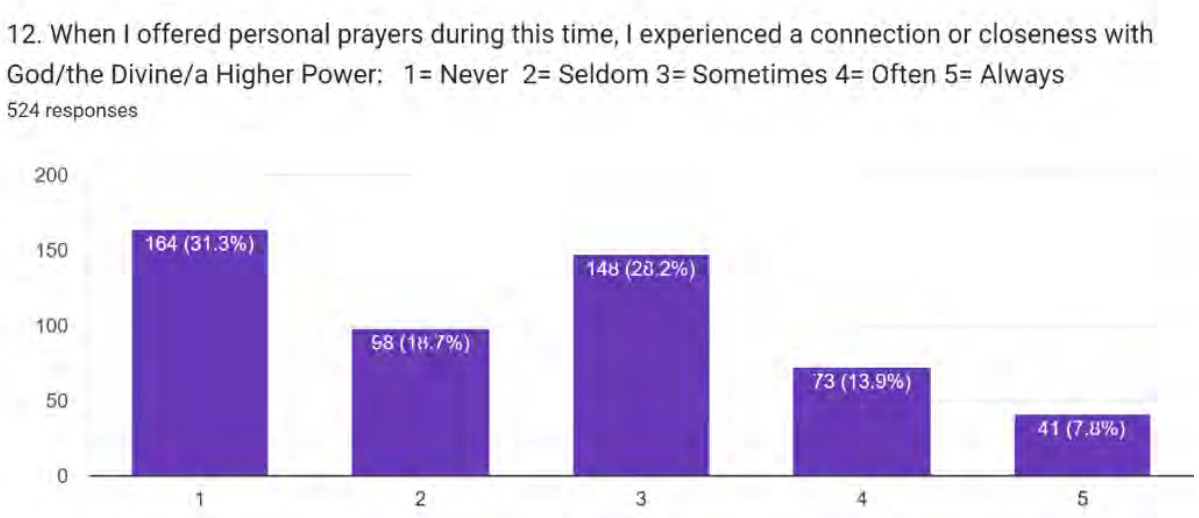
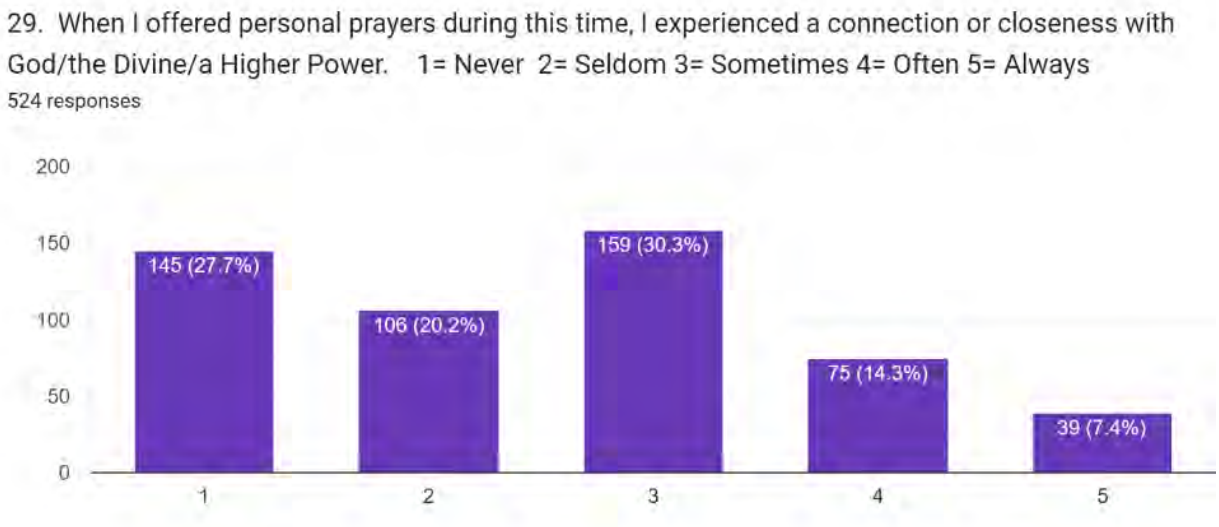


Figure 22 - Connecting to God Through Prayer During Personal Prayer During the Most Recent Six Months



Question #13 asked participants how often they felt a connection with others (e.g., the people for whom they were praying, ancestors, members of their faith community) when they engaged in personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, feeling connected to others, especially during a time when people were sheltering at home and practicing social distancing, can be understood as a benefit of a prayer practice. A slight majority of respondents (296 people, 56%) indicated that they felt a connection with others when they engaged in personal prayer sometimes, often, or every time they prayed during the first six months of the pandemic. There were 141 people (26.9%) who responded that they never felt a connection with others during this time (Figure 23). Of these 141 people, 137 people had responded that they did not pray at all during this time (Question #11). Therefore, 4 people did not feel a connection to others when they prayed during this time. Question #30 asked participants how often they felt a connection with others when they engaged in personal prayer during the most recent six months (May through October of 2022). During this period of time, 321 people (61%) reported feeling close to others sometimes, often, or always when they prayed, while 125 people (24%) indicated that they never felt close to God when they prayed during the most recent six months (Figure 24). Of these 125 people, 119 people had responded that they did not pray at all during this time (Question #11). Therefore, 6 people did not feel a connection to others when they prayed during this time

Figure 23 – Connecting to Others Through Prayer During Personal Prayer at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

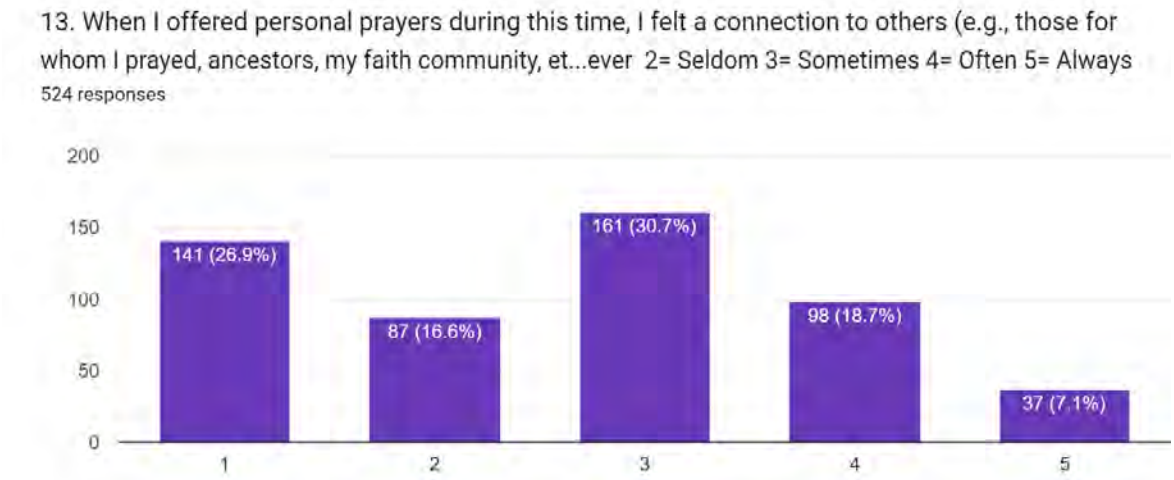
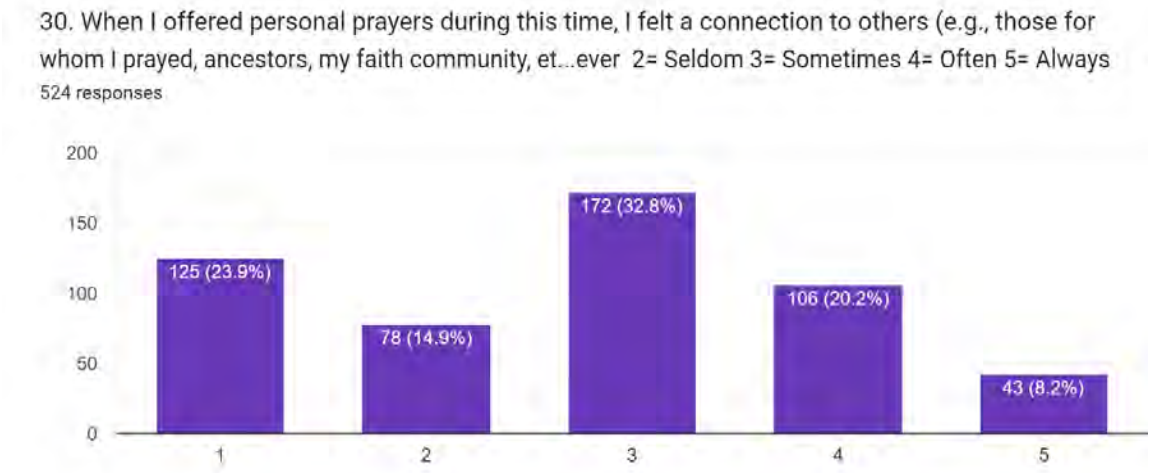


Figure 24 – Connecting *to Others Through Prayer During Personal Prayer During the Most Recent Six Months*



Two sets of questions in the survey referenced specific benefits that people might have received from engaging in a personal prayer practice during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during the most recent six months (May-October 2022). First, questions #21 and #38 asked if engaging in personal prayer during the first six months of the pandemic and the most recent six months, respectively, helped to ease worries and fears. There were 169

participants (32%) who agreed or strongly agreed that engaging in personal prayer did help ease their worries and fears during the first six months of the pandemic, while 137 participants (26%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that engaging in prayer helped to ease their worries and fears during this time. Some of these respondents may have been people who simply did not engage in personal prayer at all during this time. There were 218 respondents (42%) who neither agreed nor disagreed that personal prayer helped to ease their worries and fears during the first six months of the pandemic (Figure 25). In the time period from May-October 2022, 179 participants (34%) agreed or strongly agreed that engaging in personal prayer did help ease their worries and fears, while 129 participants (25%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that engaging in prayer helped to ease their worries and fears. Some of these respondents may have been people who simply did not engage in personal prayer at all during this time. There were 216 respondents (41%) who neither agreed nor disagreed that personal prayer helped to ease their worries and fears from May-October 2022 (Figure 26).

Figure 25 – Easing of Worries and Fears Through Prayer During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

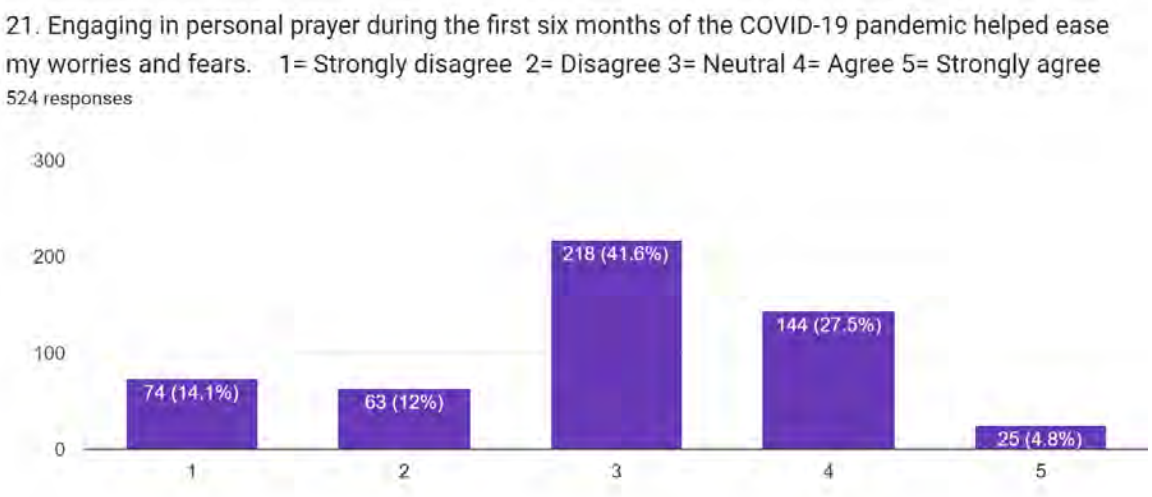
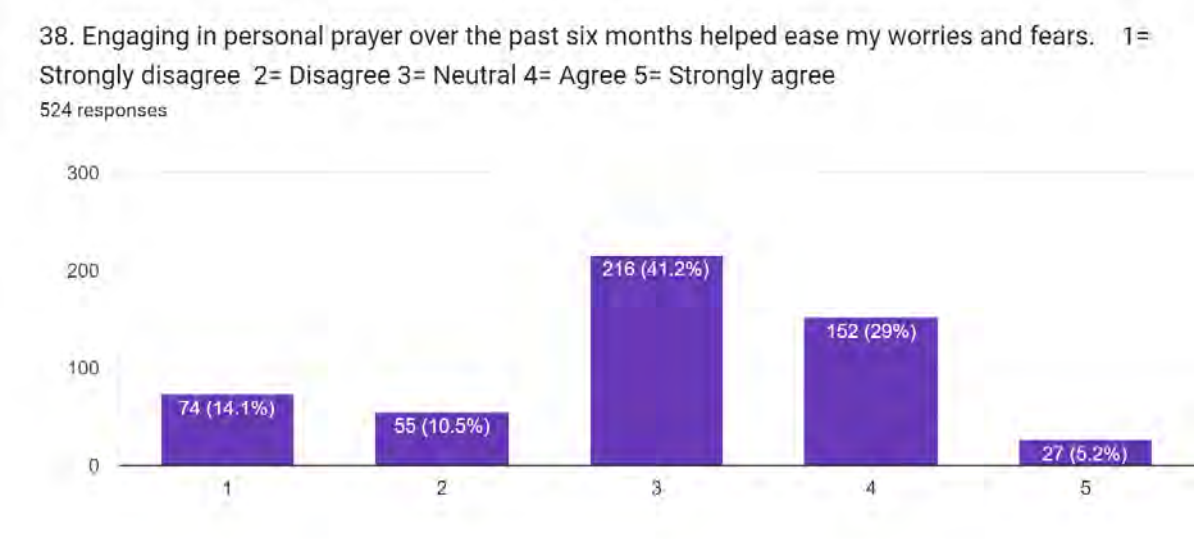


Figure 26 – Easing of Worries and Fears Through Prayer During the Most Recent Six Months



Based on a multivariate correlation analysis there is a significant positive correlation at the 99.9% statistical confidence level between the frequency with which someone prayed and how much that person believed that personal prayer helped to ease their worries and fears. This was true both during the first six months of the pandemic ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.0001$), as well as during the most recent six months of May-October 2022 ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.0001$) (Figures 27 and 28).

Figure 27 – Correlations Between the Frequency of Prayer and an Ease to Worries and Fears During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Correlations

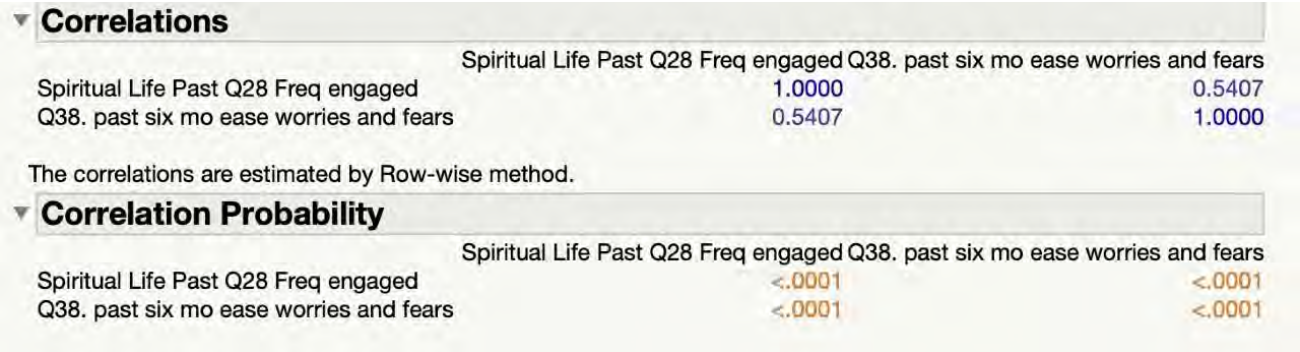
	Q11 freq prayer	Q21 1st 6 MO worries and fears
Q11 freq prayer	1.0000	0.5150
Q21 1st 6 MO worries and fears	0.5150	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

	Q11 freq prayer	Q21 1st 6 MO worries and fears
Q11 freq prayer	<.0001	<.0001
Q21 1st 6 MO worries and fears	<.0001	<.0001

Figure 28 – Correlations Between the Frequency of Prayer and an Ease to Worries and Fears from May – October 2022



Correlations

	Spiritual Life Past Q28 Freq engaged	Q38. past six mo ease worries and fears
Spiritual Life Past Q28 Freq engaged	1.0000	0.5407
Q38. past six mo ease worries and fears	0.5407	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

	Spiritual Life Past Q28 Freq engaged	Q38. past six mo ease worries and fears
Spiritual Life Past Q28 Freq engaged	<.0001	<.0001
Q38. past six mo ease worries and fears	<.0001	<.0001

Regression analysis helped determine that the content (or type) of one's prayers can affect how likely it is that one will feel their personal prayers help to ease their worries and fears. During the first six months of the pandemic, prayers containing requests for forgiveness or requests for personal health and safety did not have a statistically significant effect on the easing of worries and fears. However, prayers that contained requests for the health and safety of others, focused on expressions of gratitude, contained requests for strength and wisdom, or were meditative in nature with an openness to receive comfort and peace had a statistically significant effect on the easing of worries and fears (Figures 29 and 30).

Figure 29 – The Effect of Prayers of Gratitude and Meditative Personal Prayers on an Easing of Worries and Fears During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

Response Q21 Covid ease worries and fears

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q20 COVID meditative receive guidance, peace, or comfort.	18.884	0.00000
Q17 COVID gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	9.060	0.00000

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.400633
RSquare Adj	0.398332
Root Mean Square Error	0.832506
Mean of Response	2.967557
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	2	241.36069	120.680	174.1251
Error	521	361.08778	0.693	Prob > F
C. Total	523	602.44847		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.441584	0.091936	15.68	<.0001*
Q20 COVID meditative receive guidance, peace, or comfort.	0.3251401	0.034467	9.43	<.0001*
Q17 COVID gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	0.2187281	0.035015	6.25	<.0001*

Figure 30 – The Effect of Prayers Seeking Forgiveness, Prayers for Personal Health and Safety, Prayers for the Health and Safety of Others, and Requests for Strength and Wisdom on an Easing of Worries and Fears During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

Response Q21 Covid ease worries and fears

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q19 COVID requests strength or wisdom to navigate challenges.	11.223	0.00000
Q16 COVID health and safety others	5.085	0.00001
Q15 COVID my health and safety	1.078	0.08360
Q18. D_COVID seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	0.523	0.30019

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.403527
RSquare Adj	0.39893
Root Mean Square Error	0.832092
Mean of Response	2.967557
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	4	243.10447	60.7761	87.7789
Error	519	359.34400	0.6924	Prob > F
C. Total	523	602.44847		<.0001*

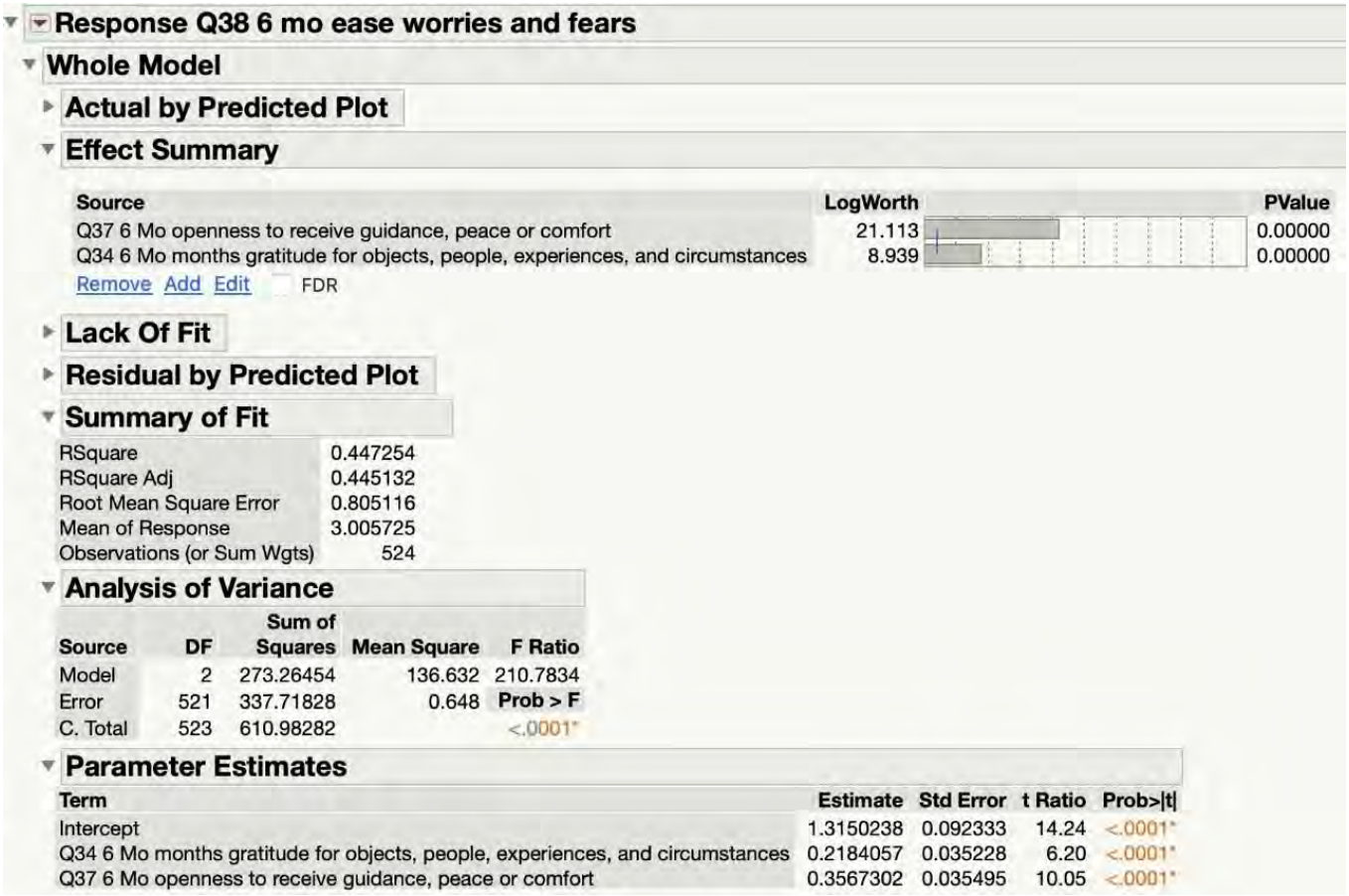
Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.2587606	0.104026	12.10	<.0001*
Q15 COVID my health and safety	0.0660217	0.038086	1.73	0.0836
Q19 COVID requests strength or wisdom to navigate challenges.	0.2914138	0.041373	7.04	<.0001*
Q18. D_COVID seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	0.0478349	0.046126	1.04	0.3002
Q16 COVID health and safety others	0.1697163	0.037675	4.50	<.0001*

Interestingly, during the most recent six months from the time that participants filled out the survey (May-October 2022), the results of the regression analysis were slightly different. During this period of time, those whose prayers contained requests for forgiveness still did not have a statistically significant effect on the easing of worries and fears. However, prayers containing requests for the health and safety of others, prayers focusing on expressions of

gratitude, prayers containing requests for strength and wisdom, prayers that were meditative in nature, *and* prayers containing requests for personal health and safety had a statistically significant effect on the easing of worries and fears (Figures 31 and 32).

Figure 31 – The Effect of Prayers of Gratitude and Meditative Personal Prayers on an Easing of Worries and Fears During May – October 2022



Response Q38 6 mo ease worries and fears

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q37 6 Mo openness to receive guidance, peace or comfort	21.113	0.00000
Q34 6 Mo months gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	8.939	0.00000

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.447254
RSquare Adj	0.445132
Root Mean Square Error	0.805116
Mean of Response	3.005725
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

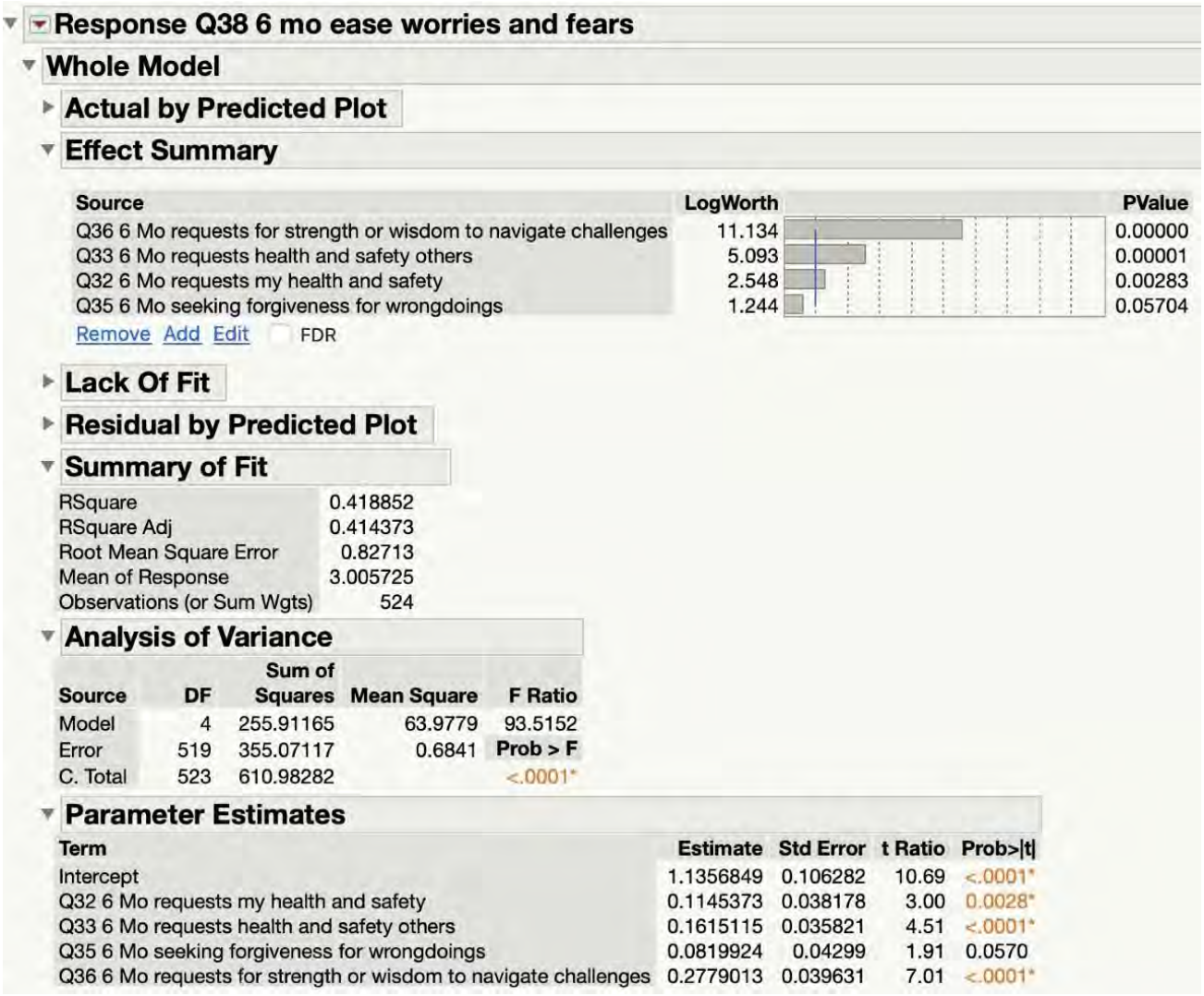
Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	2	273.26454	136.632	210.7834
Error	521	337.71828	0.648	Prob > F
C. Total	523	610.98282		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.3150238	0.092333	14.24	<.0001*
Q34 6 Mo months gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	0.2184057	0.035228	6.20	<.0001*
Q37 6 Mo openness to receive guidance, peace or comfort	0.3567302	0.035495	10.05	<.0001*

Figure 32 – The Effect of Prayers Seeking Forgiveness, Prayers for Personal Health and Safety, Prayers for the Health and Safety of Others, and Requests for Strength and Wisdom on an Easing of Worries and Fears During May – October 2022



Response Q38 6 mo ease worries and fears

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q36 6 Mo requests for strength or wisdom to navigate challenges	11.134	0.00000
Q33 6 Mo requests health and safety others	5.093	0.00001
Q32 6 Mo requests my health and safety	2.548	0.00283
Q35 6 Mo seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	1.244	0.05704

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.418852
RSquare Adj	0.414373
Root Mean Square Error	0.82713
Mean of Response	3.005725
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	4	255.91165	63.9779	93.5152
Error	519	355.07117	0.6841	Prob > F
C. Total	523	610.98282		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.1356849	0.106282	10.69	<.0001*
Q32 6 Mo requests my health and safety	0.1145373	0.038178	3.00	0.0028*
Q33 6 Mo requests health and safety others	0.1615115	0.035821	4.51	<.0001*
Q35 6 Mo seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	0.0819924	0.04299	1.91	0.0570
Q36 6 Mo requests for strength or wisdom to navigate challenges	0.2779013	0.039631	7.01	<.0001*

Question #22 asked if engaging in personal prayer during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic helped people gain clarity regarding difficulties or challenges they may have been facing. In response to this question, 136 participants (26%) agreed or strongly agreed that engaging in personal prayer helped them gain clarity regarding any struggles they were having,

while 156 participants (30%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that engaging in personal prayer helped them gain clarity when dealing with challenges. Some of these respondents may have been people who simply did not engage in personal prayer at all during this time. There were 232 respondents (44%) who neither agreed nor disagreed that personal prayer helped to ease their worries and fears during the first six months of the pandemic (Figure 33). Question #39 asked if engaging in personal prayer from May-October of 2022 helped people gain clarity regarding difficulties or challenges they may have been facing. There were 156 participants (30%) who agreed or strongly agreed that engaging in personal prayer helped them gain clarity regarding any struggles they were having, while 152 participants (29%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that engaging in prayer helped them gain clarity when dealing with challenges. Some of these respondents may have been people who simply did not engage in personal prayer at all during this time. There were 216 respondents (41%) who neither agreed nor disagreed that personal prayer helped to ease their worries and fears during this time (Figure 34).

Figure 33 – Gaining Clarity Through Prayer During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

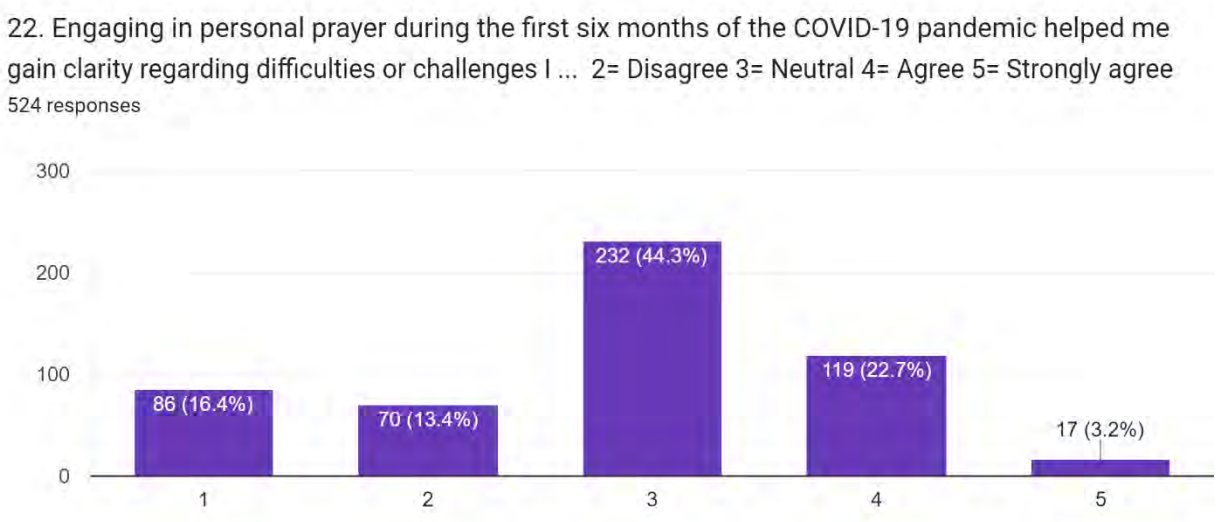


Figure 34 – Gaining Clarity Through Prayer During the Most Recent Six Months

Based on a multivariate correlation analysis there is a significant positive correlation at the 99.9% statistical confidence level between the frequency with which someone prayed and how much that person believed that personal prayer helped them gain clarity regarding challenges or difficulties they may have been facing. This is true both during the first six months of the pandemic ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.0001$), as well as during May-October 2022 ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.0001$) (see Figures 35).

Figure 35 – Correlations Between the Frequency of Prayer and a Gaining of Clarity Regarding Challenges During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic and During May – October 2022

Multivariate

Correlations

	11. Covid Prayer	22. personal prayer 1st 6 mo difficult	28 Post Covid Prayer	39. personal prayer past six months challenges
11. Covid Prayer	1.0000	0.4553	0.8159	0.4558
22. personal prayer 1st 6 mo difficult	0.4553	1.0000	0.4184	0.7571
28 Post Covid Prayer	0.8159	0.4184	1.0000	0.4785
39. personal prayer past six months challenges	0.4558	0.7571	0.4785	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

	11. Covid Prayer	22. personal prayer 1st 6 mo difficult	28 Post Covid Prayer	39. personal prayer past six months challenges
11. Covid Prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
22. personal prayer 1st 6 mo difficult	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
28 Post Covid Prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
39. personal prayer past six months challenges	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Regression analysis helped determine that the content (or type) of one's prayers can affect how likely it is that one will feel that their personal prayers help them gain clarity regarding challenges they are facing. During the first six months of the pandemic and during the most recent six months of May-October 2022, prayers focusing on expressions of gratitude, prayers that were meditative in nature, and prayers containing requests for strength and wisdom to navigate challenges had a strong statistically significant effect on whether people felt their prayers provided clarity and strength to meet challenges they were facing. Prayers that were focused on personal health and safety and prayers seeking forgiveness did not have a statistically significant effect on whether people felt their prayers provided clarity and strength to meet challenges they were facing. Prayers focusing on the health and safety of others had a moderate statistical effect on whether people felt their prayers provided clarity and strength to meet challenges they were facing (Figures 36, 37, 38 and 39).

Figure 36– The Effect of Prayers of Gratitude and Meditative Personal Prayers on Receiving Clarity to Face Challenges During the First Six Months of the Pandemic

Response Q22 Spiritual Life 1st 6 mo Clarity difficulties or challenges

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q20 COVID meditative receive guidance, peace, or comfort.	20.442	0.00000
Q17 COVID gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	6.666	0.00000

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.385998
RSquare Adj	0.383641
Root Mean Square Error	0.830944
Mean of Response	2.830153
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

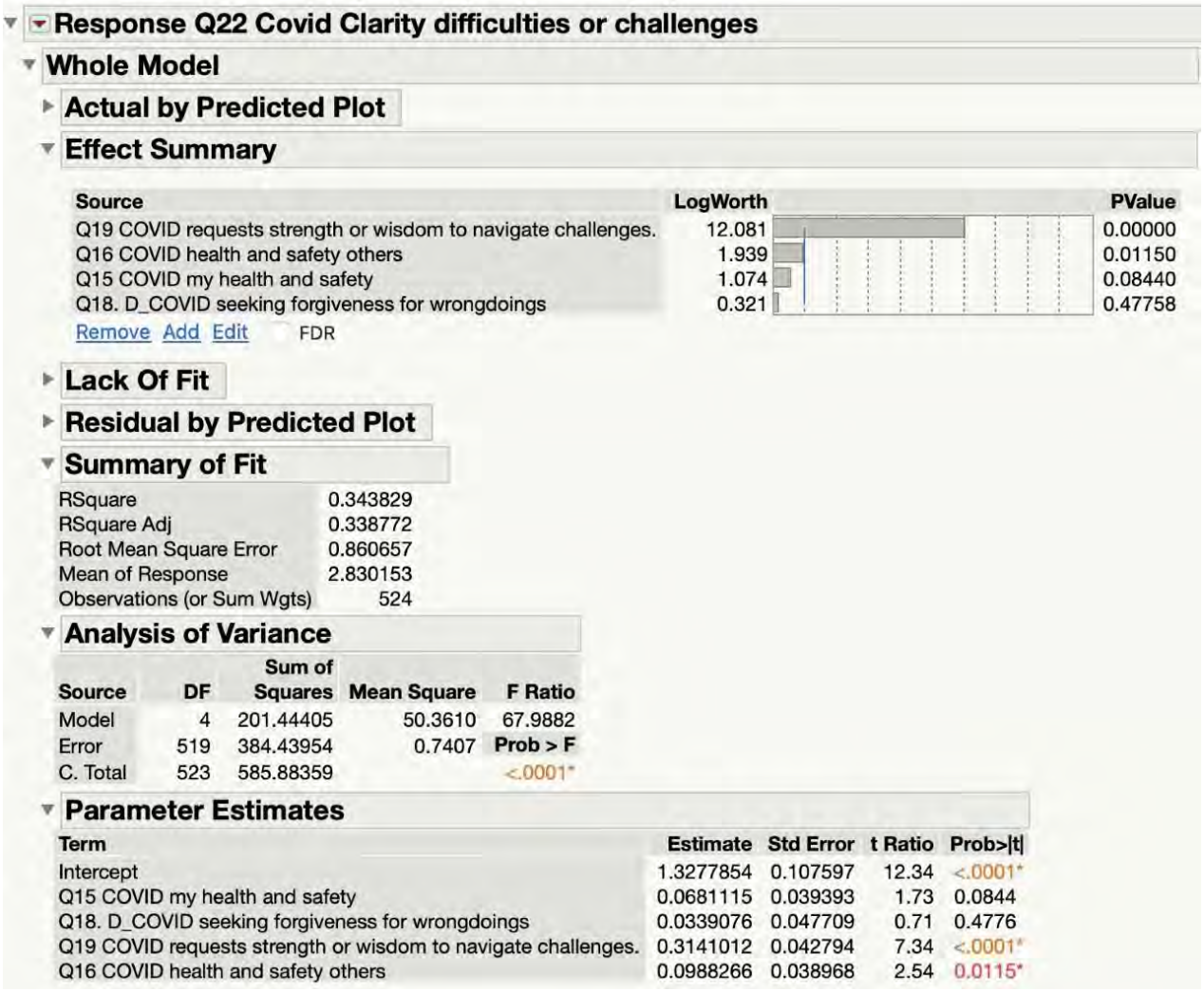
Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	2	226.14992	113.075	163.7657
Error	521	359.73367	0.690	Prob > F
C. Total	523	585.88359		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.3724007	0.091764	14.96	<.0001*
Q17 COVID gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	0.1836767	0.03495	5.26	<.0001*
Q20 COVID meditative receive guidance, peace, or comfort.	0.3394561	0.034402	9.87	<.0001*

Figure 37 – The Effect of Prayers Seeking Forgiveness, Prayers for Personal Health and Safety, Prayers for the Health and Safety of Others, and Requests for Strength and Wisdom on Receiving Clarity to Face Challenges During the First Six Months of the Pandemic



Response Q22 Covid Clarity difficulties or challenges

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q19 COVID requests strength or wisdom to navigate challenges.	12.081	0.00000
Q16 COVID health and safety others	1.939	0.01150
Q15 COVID my health and safety	1.074	0.08440
Q18. D_COVID seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	0.321	0.47758

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.343829
RSquare Adj	0.338772
Root Mean Square Error	0.860657
Mean of Response	2.830153
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	4	201.44405	50.3610	67.9882
Error	519	384.43954	0.7407	Prob > F
C. Total	523	585.88359		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.3277854	0.107597	12.34	<.0001*
Q15 COVID my health and safety	0.0681115	0.039393	1.73	0.0844
Q18. D_COVID seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	0.0339076	0.047709	0.71	0.4776
Q19 COVID requests strength or wisdom to navigate challenges.	0.3141012	0.042794	7.34	<.0001*
Q16 COVID health and safety others	0.0988266	0.038968	2.54	0.0115*

Figure 38– The Effect of Prayers of Gratitude and Meditative Personal Prayers on Receiving Clarity to Face Challenges During May – October 2022

Response Q39 6 Mo clarity regarding difficulties or challenges

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q37 6 Mo openness to receive guidance, peace or comfort	30.434	0.00000
Q34 6 Mo months gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	3.677	0.00021

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.454444
RSquare Adj	0.45235
Root Mean Square Error	0.817893
Mean of Response	2.900763
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

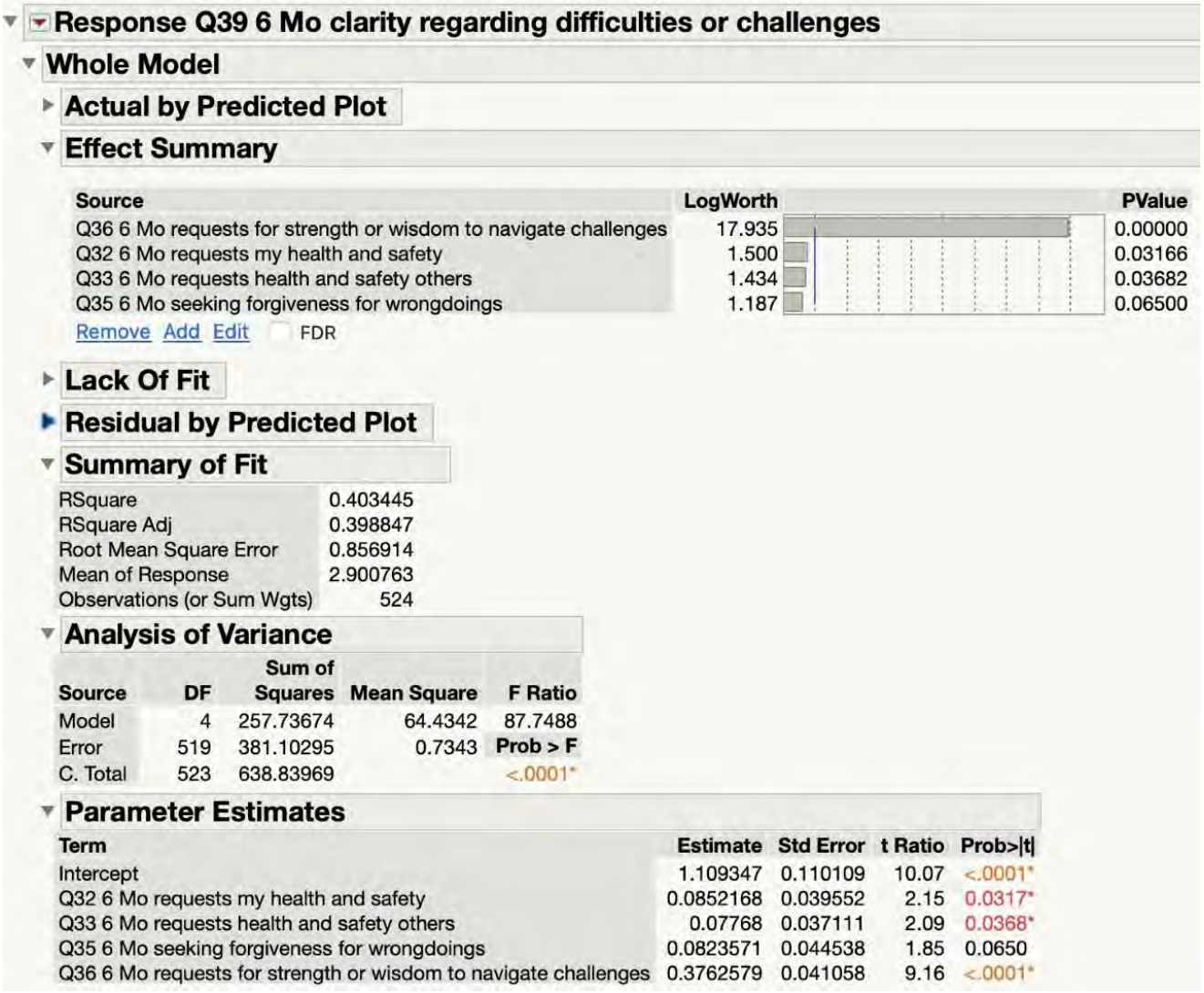
Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	2	290.31710	145.159	216.9948
Error	521	348.52259	0.669	Prob > F
C. Total	523	638.83969		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.2322666	0.093798	13.14	<.0001*
Q34 6 Mo months gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances	0.1335773	0.035787	3.73	0.0002*
Q37 6 Mo openness to receive guidance, peace or comfort	0.4474578	0.036059	12.41	<.0001*

Figure 39 – The Effect of Prayers Seeking Forgiveness, Prayers for Personal Health and Safety, Prayers for the Health and Safety of Others, and Requests for Strength and Wisdom on Receiving Clarity to Face Challenges During May – October 2022



Response Q39 6 Mo clarity regarding difficulties or challenges

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q36 6 Mo requests for strength or wisdom to navigate challenges	17.935	0.00000
Q32 6 Mo requests my health and safety	1.500	0.03166
Q33 6 Mo requests health and safety others	1.434	0.03682
Q35 6 Mo seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	1.187	0.06500

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.403445
RSquare Adj	0.398847
Root Mean Square Error	0.856914
Mean of Response	2.900763
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	4	257.73674	64.4342	87.7488
Error	519	381.10295	0.7343	Prob > F
C. Total	523	638.83969		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	1.109347	0.110109	10.07	<.0001*
Q32 6 Mo requests my health and safety	0.0852168	0.039552	2.15	0.0317*
Q33 6 Mo requests health and safety others	0.07768	0.037111	2.09	0.0368*
Q35 6 Mo seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings	0.0823571	0.044538	1.85	0.0650
Q36 6 Mo requests for strength or wisdom to navigate challenges	0.3762579	0.041058	9.16	<.0001*

Question #23 asked the participants to briefly describe any other benefits they received from engaging in personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though this question was not required, 224 people responded to the question. Out of the 224 responses, 29 of them were not relevant to the question that was asked (for example, there were participants who reiterated that they did not engage in personal prayer during this time

or described the words of their prayers but did not share any benefits they may have received from praying). With the remaining 195 responses answers were coded using key words or phrases. The results (Figure 40 and 41) show that the largest benefits people felt that they received from engaging in personal prayer during the first six months of the pandemic were feelings of calm, a sense that they were helping others, feeling connected to others (both those who are living and those who had passed away), and feelings of gratitude.

Figure 40 – Additional Benefits from Personal Prayer During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic (image generated by worditout.com)

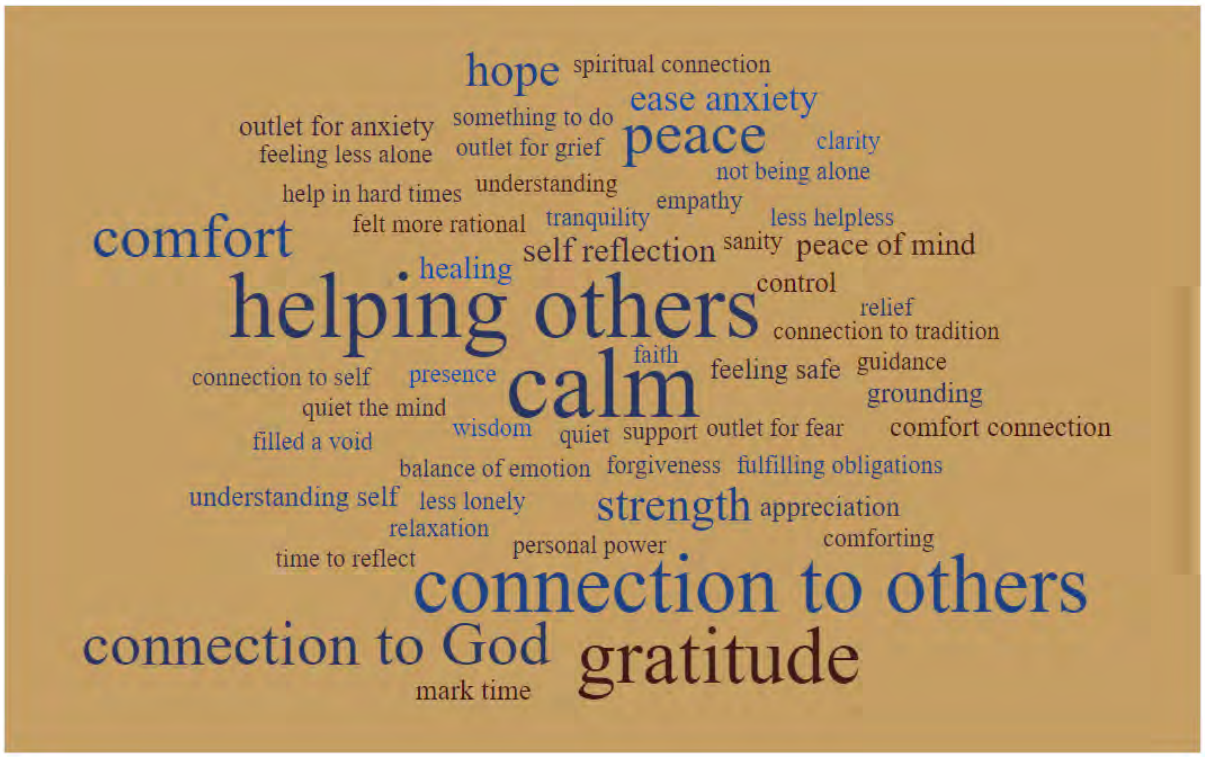
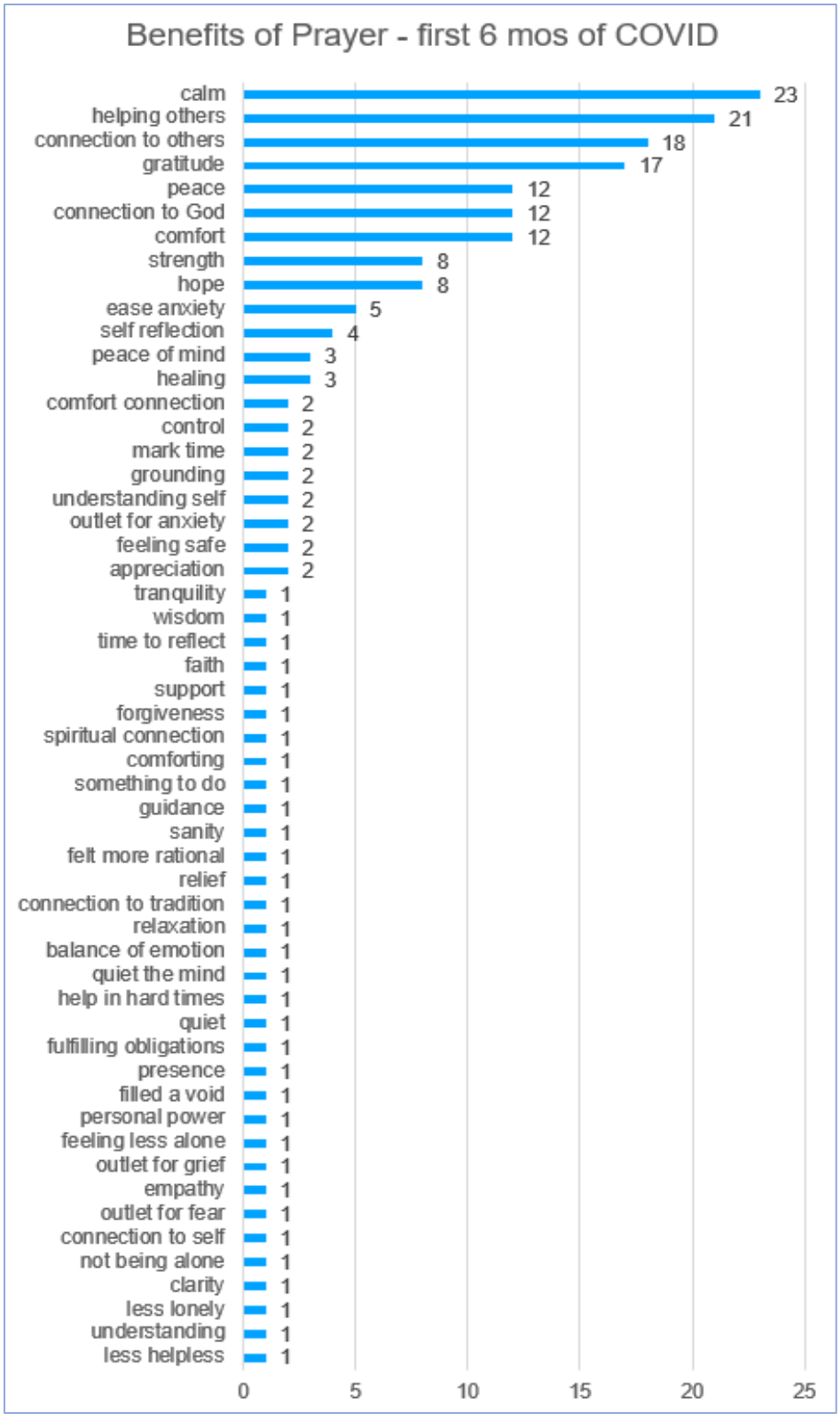


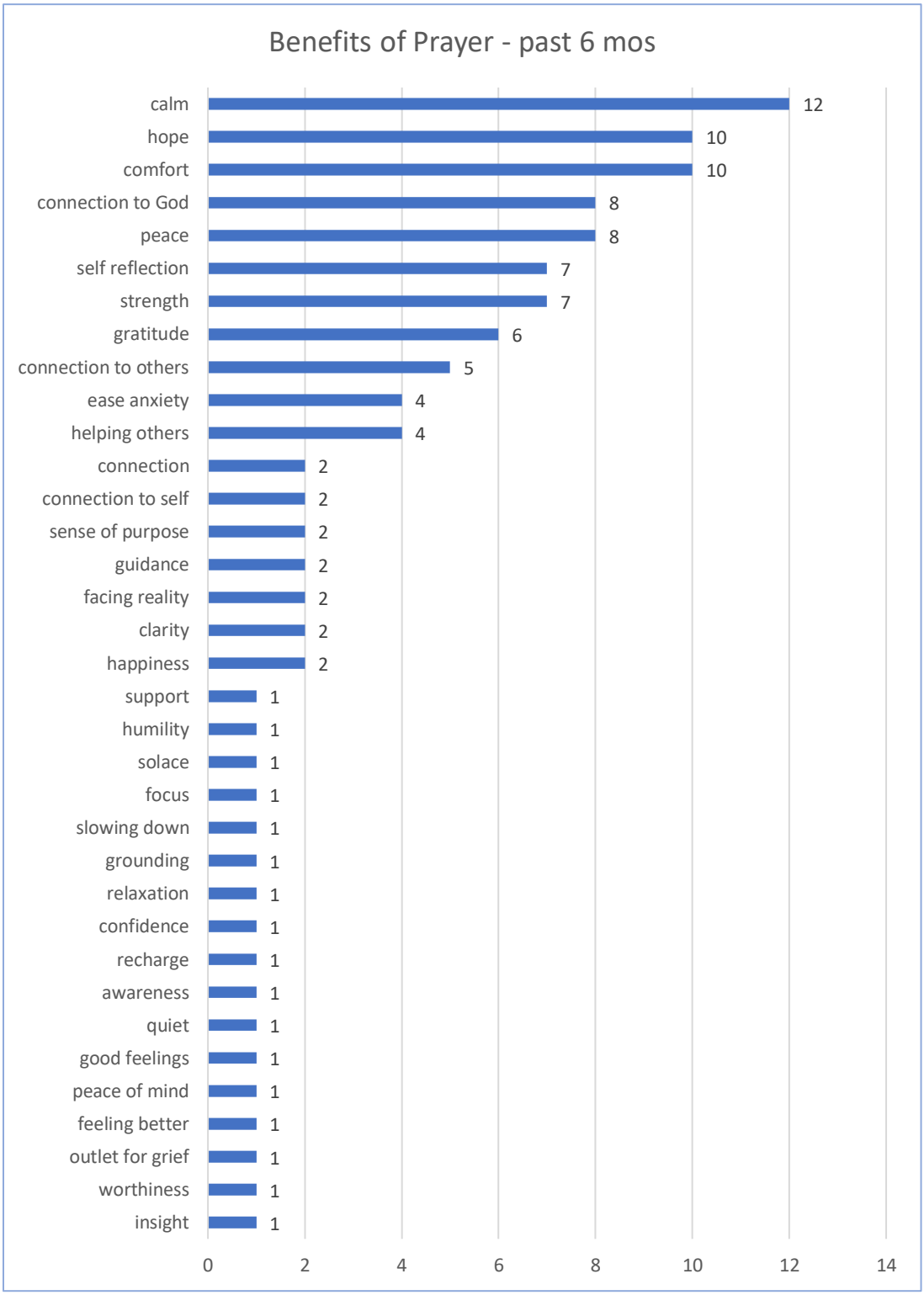
Figure 41 – Additional Benefits from Personal Prayer During the First Six Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic



Question #40 asked the participants to briefly describe any other benefits they received from engaging in personal prayer during the time from May-October 2022. This question was also not required, and 153 people responded. Out of these responses, 41 were not relevant to the question that was asked (for example, participants wrote in "N/A" or repeated that they did not engage in personal prayer during this time). Of the remaining 112 responses answers were coded using key words or phrases. The results (depicted in Figure 42 and 43) show that the most frequently reported benefit people felt that they received from engaging in personal prayer during May-October 2022 were feelings of calm. This was followed by feelings of hope and comfort, then a sense of connection to God and feelings of peace.

Figure 42 – Additional Benefits from Personal Prayer During the Most Recent Six Months (image generated by worditout.com)

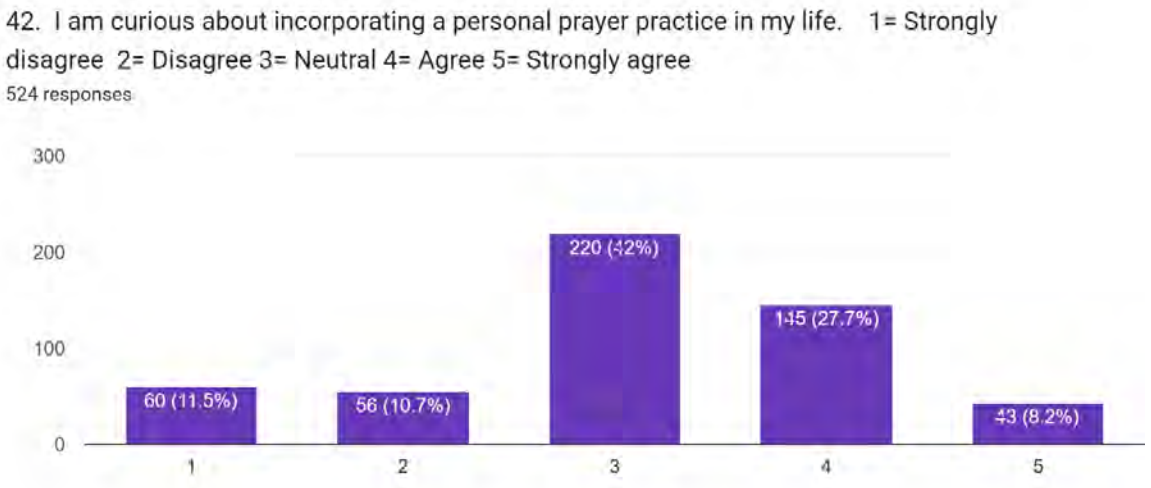
Figure 43– Additional Benefits from Personal Prayer During the Most Recent Six Months



Curiosity Regarding Developing a Personal Prayer Practice in the Future

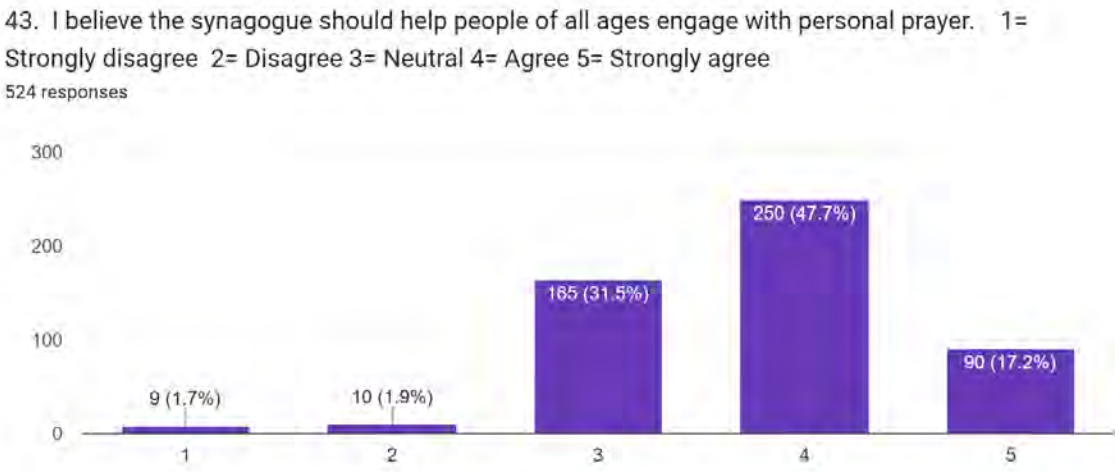
The fourth issue this survey studied was whether the members of a large, midwestern Reform congregation were curious to learn more about prayer or curious to develop a prayer practice of their own. Question #42 asked about the respondents' curiosity when it came to incorporating a personal prayer practice into their lives. In response to this question, 188 of the participants (36%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were curious about incorporating a personal prayer practice into their lives, while 116 respondents (22%) disagreed or strongly disagreed and 220 respondents (42%) neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 44).

Figure 44 – Curiosity in Developing a Personal Prayer Practice



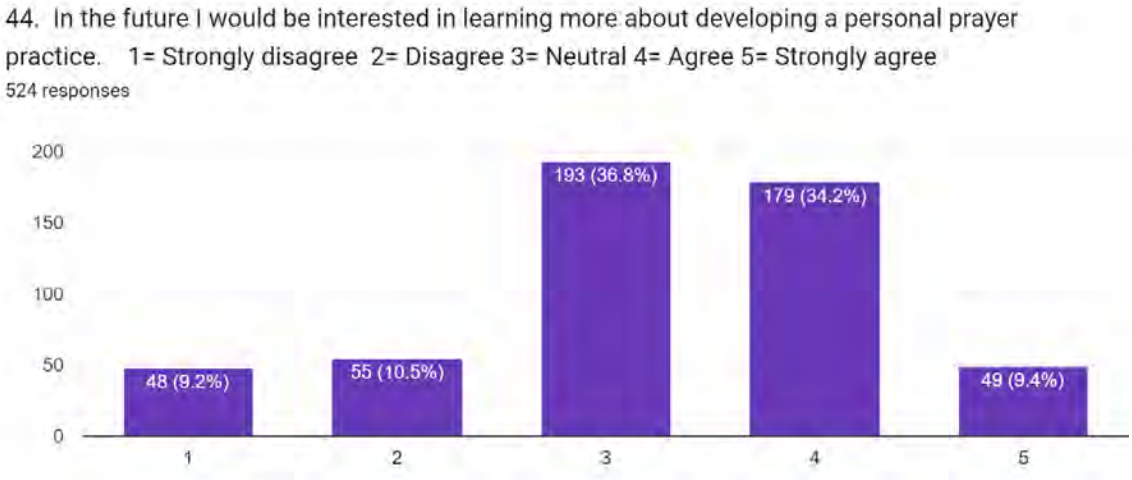
Question #43 asked respondents their opinion regarding whether or not the synagogue should help people of all ages to engage in personal prayer. The majority of respondents (340 people, 65%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Only 19 of those surveyed (4%) believed that this was not something the synagogue should help with, while 165 respondents (31%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement (Figure 45).

Figure 45 – Synagogue's Role in Helping People Develop a Personal Prayer Practice



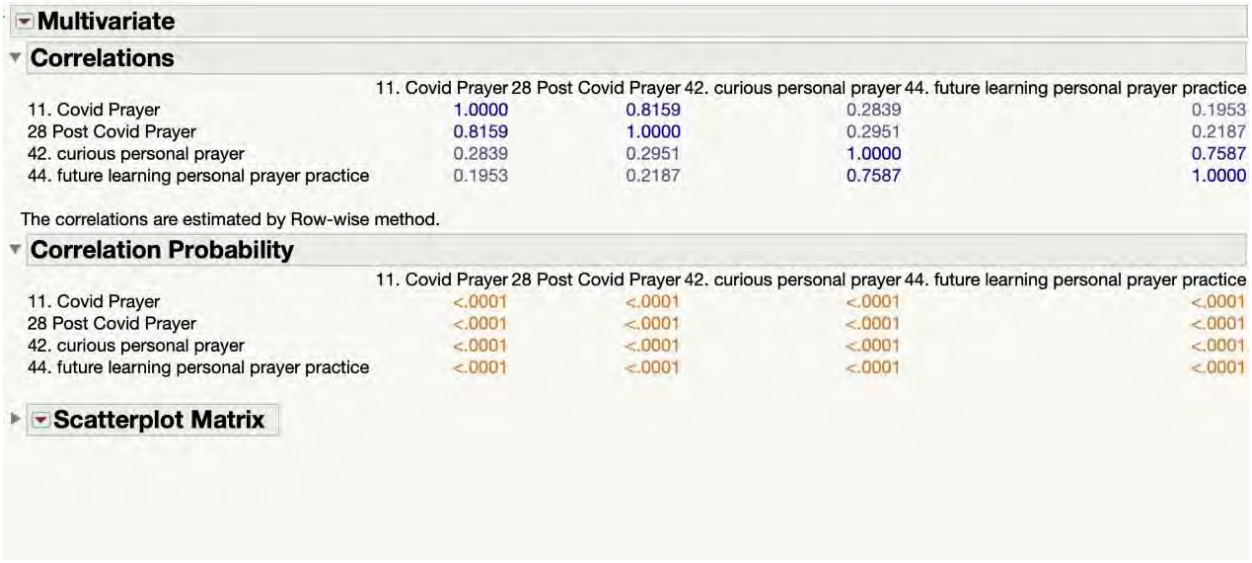
Question #44 asked the respondents whether they would be interested in learning more about developing a personal prayer practice. There were 228 people (43%) who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement; 103 respondents (20%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement; 193 respondents (37%) neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 46).

Figure 46 – Interest in Learning More About Developing a Personal Prayer Practice



Based on a multivariate correlation analysis there is a positive correlation at the 99.9% statical confidence level between the frequency with which someone prayed and how curious they are to incorporate personal prayer into their life. This relationship holds the same statistically significant value regarding the frequency of prayer during the first six months of the pandemic ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.0001$), as well as the frequency of prayer during May-October 2022 ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.0001$). There is also a positive correlation at the 99.9% statistical confidence level between the frequency with which someone prayed and how interested they would be to learn more about developing a personal prayer practice. This relationship holds the same statistically significant value regarding the frequency of prayer during the first six months of the pandemic ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.0001$), as well as the frequency of prayer during May-October 2022 ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.0001$) (Figure 47).

Figure 47 – Correlations Between the Frequency of Prayer, Curiosity Regarding Developing a Personal Prayer Practice, and Interest in Learning More About Developing a Personal Prayer Practice



Multivariate

Correlations

	11. Covid Prayer	28 Post Covid Prayer	42. curious personal prayer	44. future learning personal prayer practice
11. Covid Prayer	1.0000	0.8159	0.2839	0.1953
28 Post Covid Prayer	0.8159	1.0000	0.2951	0.2187
42. curious personal prayer	0.2839	0.2951	1.0000	0.7587
44. future learning personal prayer practice	0.1953	0.2187	0.7587	1.0000

The correlations are estimated by Row-wise method.

Correlation Probability

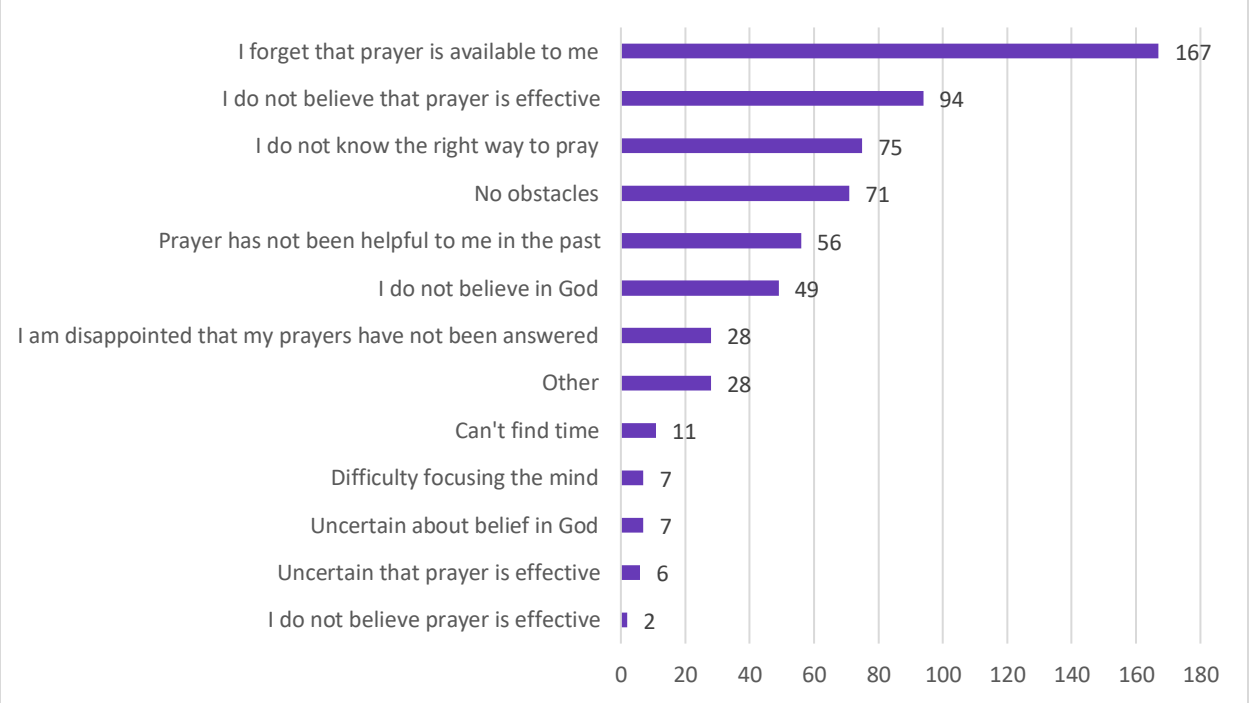
	11. Covid Prayer	28 Post Covid Prayer	42. curious personal prayer	44. future learning personal prayer practice
11. Covid Prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
28 Post Covid Prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
42. curious personal prayer	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
44. future learning personal prayer practice	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Scatterplot Matrix

Obstacles to Personal Prayer

The final issue this study set out to explore was understanding what factors get in the way of people engaging in personal prayer or developing a personal prayer practice. Participants were able to choose from one or more possible obstacles or write in their own responses. There were 601 individual responses recorded (Figure 48). Of these, 71 people (12%) indicated that they did not experience any obstacles when it came to engaging in personal prayer. The three most noted obstacles were forgetting that prayer is available (167 people, 28%); not believing that prayer is effective (96 people, 16%); and not knowing the right way to pray (75 people, 12%). There were 49 people (12%) who responded that not believing in God is an obstacle for them engaging in personal prayer (Figure 48).

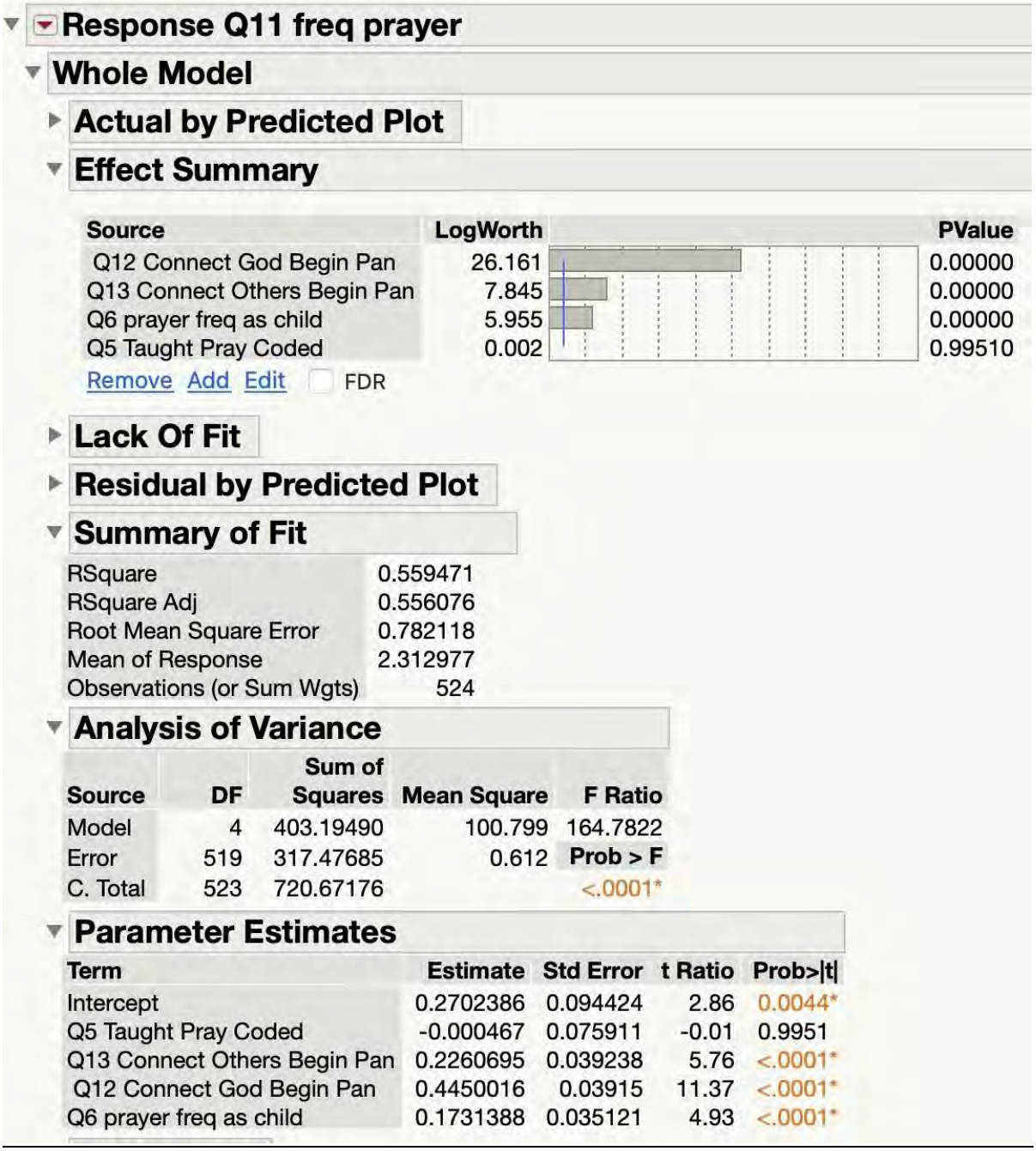
Figure 48 – Obstacles to Personal Prayer



Predictors of the Frequency of Prayer

Although not an original stated aim of this study, regression analysis allowed for an exploration of factors that may have determined the frequency of prayer during the first six months of the pandemic, as well as during the most recent six months from the time the participants filled out the survey (May-October 2022). Four factors were considered: whether participants were taught to pray as children, how frequently they engaged in personal prayer as children, how connected they felt to God when they prayed, and how connected they felt to others when they prayed. Whether or not someone was taught to pray as a child had no significant effect on the frequency of prayer at the beginning of the pandemic or during the May-October 2022. However, the frequency with which people engaged in prayer as children, how connected they felt to others when they prayed, and especially how close they felt to God when they prayed all had a statistically significant effect on how frequently they prayed during the first six months of the pandemic and during May-October 2022 (Figure 49 and Figure 50).

Figure 49 – The Effect of Being Taught to Pray as a Child, the Frequency of Prayer as a Child, Feeling Connected to Others During Personal Prayer, and Feeling Connected to God During Personal Prayer on the Frequency of Prayer During the First Six Months of the Pandemic



Response Q11 freq prayer

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Q12 Connect God Begin Pan	26.161	0.00000
Q13 Connect Others Begin Pan	7.845	0.00000
Q6 prayer freq as child	5.955	0.00000
Q5 Taught Pray Coded	0.002	0.99510

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.559471
RSquare Adj	0.556076
Root Mean Square Error	0.782118
Mean of Response	2.312977
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

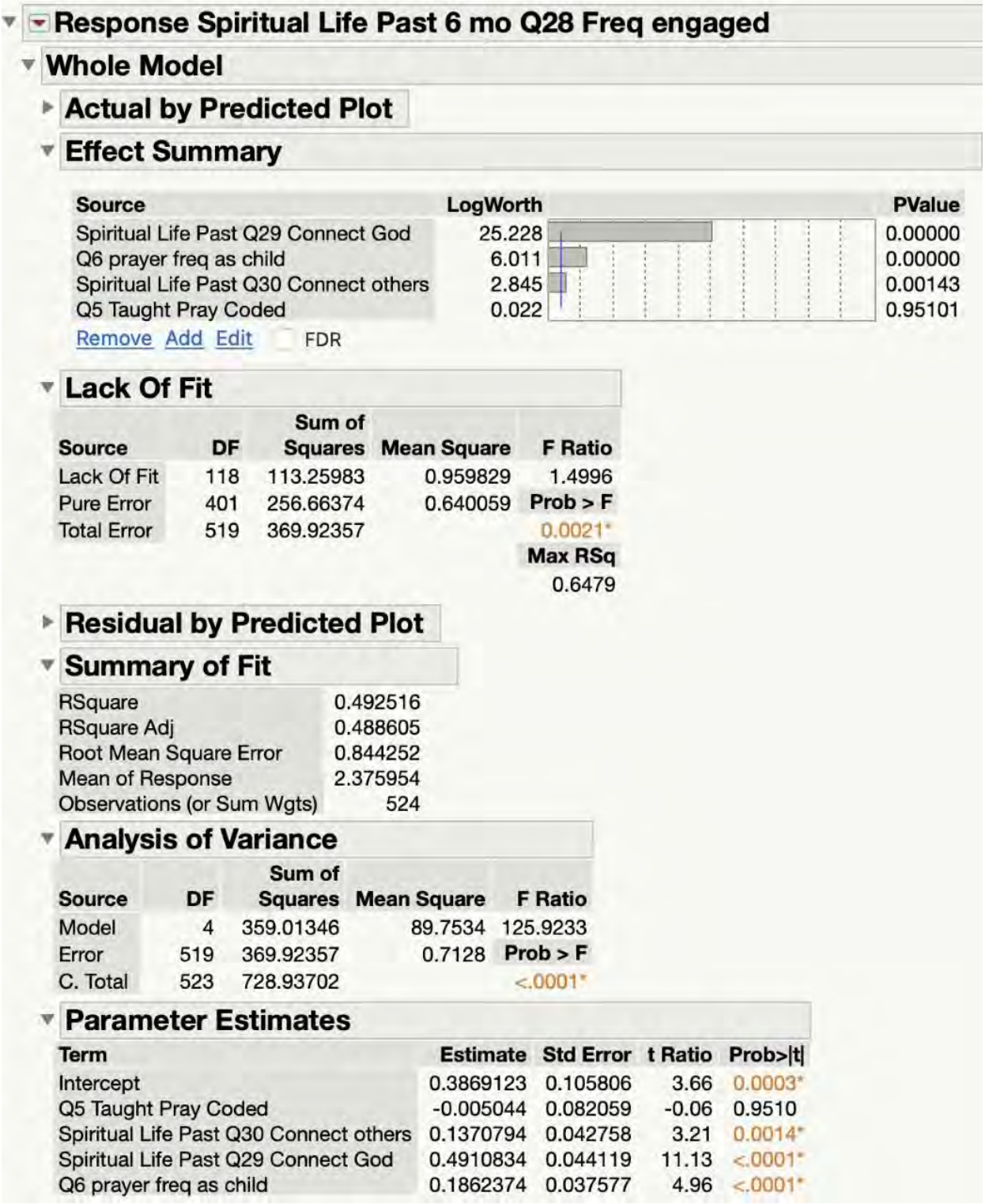
Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	4	403.19490	100.799	164.7822
Error	519	317.47685	0.612	Prob > F
C. Total	523	720.67176		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	0.2702386	0.094424	2.86	0.0044*
Q5 Taught Pray Coded	-0.000467	0.075911	-0.01	0.9951
Q13 Connect Others Begin Pan	0.2260695	0.039238	5.76	<.0001*
Q12 Connect God Begin Pan	0.4450016	0.03915	11.37	<.0001*
Q6 prayer freq as child	0.1731388	0.035121	4.93	<.0001*

Figure 50 – The Effect of Being Taught to Pray as a Child, the Frequency of Prayer as a Child, Feeling Connected to Others During Personal Prayer, and Feeling Connected to God During Personal Prayer on the Frequency of Prayer During May – October 2022



Response Spiritual Life Past 6 mo Q28 Freq engaged

Whole Model

Actual by Predicted Plot

Effect Summary

Source	LogWorth	PValue
Spiritual Life Past Q29 Connect God	25.228	0.00000
Q6 prayer freq as child	6.011	0.00000
Spiritual Life Past Q30 Connect others	2.845	0.00143
Q5 Taught Pray Coded	0.022	0.95101

Remove Add Edit FDR

Lack Of Fit

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Lack Of Fit	118	113.25983	0.959829	1.4996
Pure Error	401	256.66374	0.640059	Prob > F
Total Error	519	369.92357		0.0021*
				Max RSq
				0.6479

Residual by Predicted Plot

Summary of Fit

RSquare	0.492516
RSquare Adj	0.488605
Root Mean Square Error	0.844252
Mean of Response	2.375954
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	524

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	4	359.01346	89.7534	125.9233
Error	519	369.92357	0.7128	Prob > F
C. Total	523	728.93702		<.0001*

Parameter Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	0.3869123	0.105806	3.66	0.0003*
Q5 Taught Pray Coded	-0.005044	0.082059	-0.06	0.9510
Spiritual Life Past Q30 Connect others	0.1370794	0.042758	3.21	0.0014*
Spiritual Life Past Q29 Connect God	0.4910834	0.044119	11.13	<.0001*
Q6 prayer freq as child	0.1862374	0.037577	4.96	<.0001*

Discussion

Findings and Reflections on the Frequency of Engagement with Personal Prayer

The initial idea for this study came about through my own experience with personal prayer at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a congregational rabbi, I was confronted with numerous challenges when the pandemic began. Members were struggling as they or their loved ones tried to cope with illness, isolation, and existential concerns. At the same time, the synagogue was closed, and worship had fully moved to streaming where we had no direct contact with those who were "tuning in" for services. In addition, visits to hospitals, nursing homes, and private residences were prohibited. Other than phone calls or Zoom calls, I felt limited in the ways that I could provide support and care for members. That is when an impulse to return to personal prayer arose. I had not had a consistent personal prayer practice for a number of years, but in those early days and months of the pandemic, I felt that praying for the health and comfort of members was a concrete action that I could and should take. In doing so, this practice helped me to regain a sense of agency, feel more connected to others, feel connected to God, and to feel as though I was actually bringing some small measure of healing and comfort to those for whom I prayed. I have continued to engage in this personal prayer practice even though threats of the COVID-19 pandemic have greatly eased. While the content of my personal prayers has changed slightly over these past three years, the practice has continued to strengthen my feelings of a connection to God and to others. My experience of engaging more deeply with personal prayer as a response to the many disruptions caused by the pandemic caused me to wonder if other members of the community had also turned to personal prayer when the pandemic began.

The main purpose of this study was simply to explore whether members of a Reform Jewish congregation engaged in personal prayer during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether they continued to engage in personal prayer after the initial crisis of the pandemic had passed. The study confirmed that a large majority of the respondents (387 people, 74%) did engage in personal prayer at least once a week at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also demonstrated that the majority of the respondents (405 people, 77%) engaged in personal prayer at least once a week during six-month period between May and October 2022, a full two years after the pandemic began.

It is interesting to note that a slightly higher number of people (18 people, 3%) reported that they engaged in personal prayer at least once a week during the six-month period between May and October 2022 than during the first six months of the pandemic. This may be attributed to the fact that people's recollections from the past six months were more reliable than their recollections from two years ago. This increase could also be connected to the fact that the Jewish High Holy Days occurred in September 2022. Perhaps more people had engaged in personal prayer in connection with these sacred times of communal gathering. This could also explain why 70 more people reported that their prayers focused on seeking forgiveness for wrongdoings during the six-month period between May and October 2022 than during the first six months of the pandemic, as much of the focus of the High Holy Days has to do with repentance and forgiveness.

As was noted previously, there is little quantitative research on the prayer practices of American Reform Jews. Being able to confirm, through this study, that the majority of members of an American Reform Jewish congregation engage in personal prayer at least once a week adds to the overall body of research on prayer and the Jewish community.

The study was also able to confirm that there was a positive correlation between the frequency with which participants experienced the negative emotions of anxiety, loneliness, and grief and the frequency with which they engaged in personal prayer both during the initial months of the pandemic, as well as during May-October 2022. This data is in keeping with numerous studies that have found that individuals turn to prayer during times of stress, uncertainty, and natural disasters (Ai, Tice, Peterson, & Huang, 2005; Su, Deng, & Qi, 2018). It also affirms the theological idea that prayer is about preparing oneself to receive God's presence in one's life (Kreisel, 2015), as well as the psychological understanding that people turn to prayer when they have a longing for connection to others or to the Divine (Pargament, 2007). In providing an opportunity to connect with others and with God, prayer can sometimes assuage feelings of loneliness or grief. The overall results of this study also help to reinforce findings from other studies that personal prayer can be a positive coping mechanism during times of struggle or disruption, particularly when people are wrestling with physical or mental illness, experiencing loneliness, or confronting existential concerns (Rokach and Brock, 1997; Pargament, et al., 2004; Boelens, et al., 2009; Ellison, et al., 2014).

Findings and Reflections on the Benefits of Personal Prayer

Respondents to the survey self-reported receiving multiple benefits from their personal prayers. During the first six months of the pandemic, the most often cited benefits included feelings of calm, a sense that they were helping others, gratitude, feeling a connection to God, gaining strength, and easing anxiety. During the period of time between May and October 2022, the most often cited benefits included feelings of calm, hope, comfort, sensing a connection to God, and peace. Many of these benefits, including feelings of calm and peace, the gaining of

strength, and easing of anxiety, are consistent with other research looking at the benefits of prayer as a coping mechanism when facing illness or non-interpersonal trauma (Ai, et al., 2008; Harris, et al., 2010). The fact that "helping others" was the second most often cited benefit of personal prayer during the beginning of the pandemic is in keeping with research confirming that prayer can aid in alleviating feelings of helplessness in the face of need (Levine, 2008, p. 87). This also affirms the psychological idea that prayer can serve as a sort of transitional space where people can regain at least a small sense of control when the world feels chaotic and even cruel (Ossey, 2020). It is possible that during the first six months of the pandemic, when hundreds of thousands of people had already contracted the virus and shelter-at-home orders were in place, prayer felt like one of the few proactive "helping" activities in which people could engage. It is possible that prayer can continue to play this role in the future when individuals confront situations in which their ability to help others is limited.

Beyond the self-reported benefits of personal prayer, this study explored whether people felt their worries eased as a result of engaging in personal prayer and whether they felt they had gained clarity regarding challenges in their lives as a result of engaging in personal prayer. The data demonstrated that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between the frequency with which people engaged in personal prayer and the feeling that engaging in personal prayer helped to ease worries and fears, as well as a statistically significant positive correlation between the frequency with which people engaged in personal prayer that the feeling that those prayers helped people gain a sense of clarity regarding difficulties or challenges. This affirms the psychological notion of prayer as an experience of inwardness that can help people gain a better understanding of themselves, especially in relationship to their struggles (Edmundson, 2007), as well as the theological idea that being in God's presence through prayer

helps us to better know and understand ourselves (Kramer, 2010). Furthermore, regression analysis indicated that the type of prayer in which people engaged influenced how great of an effect personal prayer had on easing worries and fears and on gaining clarity to deal with challenges. For those whose prayers consisted of expressions of gratitude, requests for the health and safety of others, requests for wisdom and strength, and an openness to receive guidance, comfort, and peace, personal prayer helped to ease worries and fears. People who prayed for their own health and safety and for forgiveness from wrongdoing did not experience this same easing of worries and fears. These findings are in keeping with Jewish tradition that believes that the prayers of one who prays for others before praying for oneself will be answered first (see Rashi's commentary on Gen. 21:1). For those whose prayers consisted of expressions of gratitude, requests for wisdom and strength to navigate challenges, and an openness to receive guidance, comfort, and peace, personal prayer helped people to gain clarity regarding difficulties they were facing. These findings are in keeping with research that shows that prayers of thanksgiving and receptive prayers related positively to measures of well-being, while prayers of confession and supplication (requests) related negatively or neutrally to measures of well-being (Whittington and Scher, 2010).

The study also showed a statistically significant positive correlation between the frequency with which one prayed and feelings of connection to others, as well as feelings of connection to God. Through regression analysis it was determined that the frequency with which one prayed as a child, feelings of connection to others while one prayed, and especially feeling connected to God while one prayed were all factors in determining how frequently one prayed as an adult. These findings are in keeping with psychological and theological understandings of prayer. Based on decades of research, Pargament (2007) has explained: "At its heart, prayer is a

way to experience a relationship with the divine," (p. 87). Furthermore, Froese and Jones (2021) noted: "The emotional need to interact with God … appears to be a major reason why people pray in the first place. And if this relationship proves positive, it can deepen a sense of individual security and significance in the world" (p. 11). Judaism supports this notion of prayer as a way to experience a relationship with God that helps people feel safe and seen. Wolpe (1990) writes:

> True prayer is liberation. It releases the imaginings and yearnings of a soul, relieves – even if only for a moment – the fear of being alone, or never being understood. "Although the distance from earth to heaven is a journey of five hundred years, when one whispers a prayer, or even meditates in silence, God is nearby and hears" (Deut. R. 2:10). (p. 103)

Based on this study, the impetus for *why* people begin to engage in personal prayer cannot be conclusively stated. It is not clear whether people begin a personal prayer practice because they yearn for a connection with God or others (longing), whether they hope to know themselves better or gain a sense of clarity (inwardness), or whether they seek a sense of agency in their lives (transitional phenomenon). However, this study does provide strong statistical evidence that there is a positive correlation between the frequency with which people pray and how connected they feel to God and others. There is also a positive correlation between the frequency with which people pray and their sense that their prayers help ease fears and provide clarity.

Findings and Reflections on Personal Prayer Obstacles, Education, and Opportunities

Participants in this study had an opportunity to self-report on any obstacles they experienced when engaging in personal prayer. It was surprising that only 12% of the

participants reported that not believing in God was an obstacle to their engagement with personal prayer. Based on the 2020 Pew Research Center survey, only 26% of Jews report believing in the God of the Bible and 22% of Jews do not believe in any higher power or spiritual force (Diamant, 2021). It is my belief, that Jewish communities would benefit from further research looking at the connection between belief in God and personal prayer.

The three most often reported obstacles were people forgetting that prayer is available to them, people not believing that prayer is effective, and people not knowing the "right way" to pray. These obstacles can be addressed within synagogue communities. Even though there is no one "right" way to engage in personal prayer, based on the findings of this survey, information about how one can "correctly" pray should be included in any education the synagogue may offer on prayer. Furthermore, education about the potential benefits of personal prayer, whether through classes or sermons, may help people who currently do not believe in the efficacy of prayer to reevaluate their thoughts on the matter. This type of information should be presented from both a theological and psychological or scientific perspective, as findings from a study conducted by the Perceptions Project on the relationship between science and religion implied that it is "often less of a challenge to get Jews to embrace science than it is to get them to embrace Judaism" ("Why It's Needed," n.d.).

As a rabbi and Jewish educator, I will always believe in the power of education. However, results of this study point to the fact that when it comes to personal prayer, educational opportunities may not be enough to encourage people to engage with personal prayer or develop a personal prayer practice. First, this survey discovered that participants expressed some ambivalence when it comes to their synagogue focusing more on personal prayer. While the majority of respondents agreed that one of the roles of the synagogue is to help people engage

with personal prayer, only a little over one-third of the respondents indicated that they, themselves, were curious about incorporating a personal prayer practice into their lives or would be interested in learning more about developing a personal prayer practice. Forty-two percent of the respondents felt neutral when asked about their curiosity of incorporating a personal prayer practice into their lives, and 37% of the respondents felt neutral when asked if they were interested in learning more about developing a personal prayer practice. These results could indicate that people are already satisfied with their personal prayer practices, or it could mean they are not sure if they want to explore this topic any further. Future research might focus on the kinds of support people are looking for from their synagogues when it comes to personal prayer.

Second, regression analysis demonstrated that being taught to pray as a child was not a predictive factor of how frequently a person would engage in personal prayer as an adult. On the other hand, how frequently one prayed as a child was a determining factor in how frequently a person would engage in personal prayer as an adult. These types of findings affirm the research conducted by Froese and Jones (2021) who discovered that the "felt emotional experience of prayer" (p. 2) was a key factor in determining whether people feel that prayer is important in their lives. Therefore, it might be more beneficial for synagogues to provide opportunities for people to *experience* personal prayer, as opposed to simply learning about personal prayer. Ideas for personal prayer experiences within the synagogue include elongating the amount of time set aside for silent prayer with communal worship services, designating quiet time inside the sanctuary before the weekly Shabbat service so that people might spend some time in personal prayer before the communal service begins, and reminding members that the sanctuary and other contemplative spaces on the synagogue campus are open to them throughout the week if being in these spaces would add to their personal prayer experience. As Kushner (1993) explains:

> Worship in Judaism is not a final exam in theology, in which God examines what we know and affirm. It is a quest for a certain kind of emotional-spiritual experience. It is not "talking to God" so much as it is using words and music to come into the presence of God in the hope that we will be changed by doing so. (p. 202)

The more people are able or willing to enter into these kinds of experiences with personal prayer, the more they may be able to discover the benefits of personal prayer for themselves. Future research might look at prayer initiatives within congregations and the responses that members have to these programs.

Limitations of the Study

While this study had a large number of participants, these participants were limited in that they were all members of a midwestern Reform congregation. There is no certainty that these results would hold true for members of Reform congregations living, for example, on the East or West coast. Future research might replicate this study on a larger scale by reaching out to members of Reform congregations from all regions of North America.

Another limitation of the study was that it was not conducted as a two-stage process. It relied on people's memories of their experiences with personal prayer from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, two years prior to the time in which they filled out the survey. An example of how memories of two years prior are not always be accurate descriptors of experiences may possibly be seen in the discrepancy in the results of Questions # 11 and #15. In Question #11, a total of 387 people responded that they engaged in personal prayer at least once a week during the first six months of the pandemic. In Question #15, 429 people responded that they prayed for the health of someone else at least "seldomly" during this same time. What can

account for this discrepancy? Perhaps being prompted with a specific example of the content of one's prayers in Question #15 prompted people to remember that they had prayed during the first six months of the pandemic. Perhaps people's desire to be "seen" as caring for others through prayer caused them to answer this question with an affirmative response. Or perhaps the two-year span of time meant that their memories were not as accurate. However, participants were also asked about their frequency of prayer and whether they prayed on behalf of others during May – October of 2022 (within the last six months of their taking the survey), and there was only a slightly smaller discrepancy in these responses (405 people responded that they engaged in personal prayer at least once a week from May – October 2022, and 437 people responded that they prayed for the health of someone else at least "seldomly" during this same time). Therefore, it is the author's belief that because the pandemic was such a powerful and unique event in the lives of every person, memories of the beginning of the pandemic were still quite strong for many of the respondents.

Finally, this study was distributed to members of a Reform congregation by their rabbi of twenty-five years. A personal request to fill out the survey was made by the rabbi, and there is a chance that some of the respondents answered questions about personal prayer in ways they thought their rabbi would want them to. This concern was addressed by conducting an anonymous survey and communicating this to all participants, assuring them that the rabbi would not be able to attach responses to individuals.

Concluding Thoughts

My understanding of personal prayer is that it is a practice that can help us on three levels. It can provide an experiential sense of God, the Divine, or however we understand a

higher power or greater force within the universe. It can help us feel a greater sense of connection to others across space and time. Finally, it can help us discern the true longings of our souls and gain clarity in our challenges and struggles. It is a practice that can be entered into at any time and is accessible to people throughout their lives.

In her book, *The Spiritual Child*, Miller (2015) explains that personal prayer also helps people express the natural spiritual aspects of their humanity. Miller asserts that natural spirituality is something all children are born with, and that nurturing the innate spirituality of children is one of the strongest ways to ensure a positive sense of humility and self-worth as they mature throughout their lives. She cites ritual and prayer as meaningful ways to help children maintain a sense of natural spirituality and develop a relationship with God (pp. 111-114). She is clear that neither ritual nor prayer needs to occur within the structure of organized religion, so she is pointing to the importance of personal prayer as one way to support a child's innate spirituality.

There has also been a wealth of research focused on the benefits of spirituality for older adults. Park's (2007) survey of literature on the effects of spirituality and religion on the aging process suggests that spirituality can be a protective force against physical and mental health challenges as one ages (p. 316-317). Moberg (2008) explains that spirituality tends to increase during later adulthood and that prayer has been determined to be a resource for coping with struggles, like illness and loneliness, throughout one's lifespan (p. 11).

There are few places that have the privilege of providing opportunities to focus on one's spiritual needs and spiritual struggles from birth through death. The synagogue is, or should be, one of those places, and one of the spiritual practices that synagogues can authentically offer people of all ages is personal prayer. Personal prayer is a practice one can engage in from a very

young age and continue to engage in throughout one's life; the benefits of personal prayer can be experienced at any age. Unlike ritual, communal worship, religious education, or holiday experiences, personal prayer can occur at any time and in any place. It does not require a *minyan*, a building, special ritual objects, or special knowledge. An introduction to personal prayer is a gift that clergy and Jewish educators can share with individuals and families of every age. Synagogues can continue to nurture that gift by offering experiences for members to engage in personal prayer during regular Shabbat worship, life cycle moments, or specially focused programs.

It has been this author's experience that the COVID-19 pandemic provided people with an opportunity to reassess the place of spirituality, faith, ritual, and prayer in their lives, and that many people are longing for ways to explore their connections with God or a higher power. Just presenting members of my congregation with this survey on personal prayer seems to have opened up in a number of them the desire to speak more about spiritual practice and spiritual aspirations. Based on the results of this study, which indicate that the majority of members do engage in personal prayer, I have also been much more open with people about engaging in personal prayer. Prior to this research, I reserved the sharing of personal prayers on behalf of members to times when they or their loved ones were ill. The study results have given me confidence that members would not only tolerate a suggestion to be together in prayer with their rabbi in other circumstances, but actually welcome it.

I have begun offering to share in a moment of prayer with those who come to speak with me regarding pastoral concerns. In these sessions I have asked members if they would like to voice their own prayer or have me recite one for them. The majority of members prefer that I speak words of prayer, and most of these members become tearful as I do. Prayer has the power

to connect people to their emotions in ways that prosaic language, no matter how kind, cannot always do. These prayers call upon God, inviting God "into the meeting," so to speak, so that people are able to sense a connection to a Power greater than themselves during their times of suffering or struggle in more palpable and transparent ways.

I have also begun adding personal prayers to life cycle moments. Before a child becomes *b'nei mitzvah* I offer them a personal prayer which lets them know of my belief that God will be with them while they are leading the service. Whether or not each child can express their own belief in God, they have a model of someone who cares about them, calling upon God to be with them in what can be an anxiety-filled time. Here, I am able to model for the students the possibility of turning to prayer in moments of worry or stress (the predominant feelings students express as they prepare to lead the worship service). I have also begun concluding in-person condolence calls with a personal prayer asking God to care for the soul of the person who has just died. I have found that doing so seems to provide great comfort to the families. One person expressed their gratitude to me after sharing in a prayer moment like this by saying, "It [the prayer] helped me feel like [my loved one] is not alone, like God is with her now."

The survey results indicated that the largest obstacle to people engaging in personal prayer is simply remembering that personal prayer is available to them. Engaging in personal prayer directly with congregants (especially when the prayers are spoken in plain English) is a way of reminding them that prayer *is* available, and often provides feelings of comfort and peace, as well as a connection with God.

Personal prayer is an accessible path for spiritual connections for all people, and it is this author's hope that the findings of this study will inspire clergy and Jewish educators to seize this

moment to expand their offerings of discussions about, education on, and opportunities for personal prayer in the communities they serve.

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Appendix A – Survey Questions

1. What is your age?
   ___ 29 years or younger
   ___ 30-39 years old
   ___ 40-49 years old
   ___ 50-59 years old
   ___ 60-69 years old
   ___ 70-79 years old
   ___ Over 80 years old

2. Select the gender that describes you best.
   ___ Female
   ___ Male
   ___ Non-binary
   ___ Other

3. Describe the religious or spiritual background of your childhood.
   ___ Jewish
   ___ Protestant
   ___ Catholic
   ___ Muslim
   ___ Hinduism
   ___ Other
   ___ None

The next set of questions (#4-6) focus on the way you did or did not experience personal prayer during your childhood.

4. Personal prayers are prayers that are offered on one's own, distinct from congregational/communal worship. I was raised in an environment where family members engaged in personal prayer.

   ___ Yes
   ___ No
   ___ I don't know

5. From whom did you learn to pray? (check all that apply)
   ___ Parent
   ___ Grandparent
   ___ Clergyperson
   ___ Teacher

___ Friend
___ No one taught me how to pray

6. As a child, I engaged in personal prayer:

1	2	3	4	5
Never	1-2 times/week	3-6 times/week	Once a day	More than once per day

For the next set of questions (#7-10), please answer based on your emotional experience during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March-September 2020).

7. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic I experienced feelings of anxiety:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

8. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic I felt alone:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

9. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic I felt happy:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

10. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic I experienced grief:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

For the next set of questions (#11-23), please answer based on your experience with personal prayer (or lack thereof) during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March-September 2020). Remember, personal prayers are prayers that are offered on one's own, distinct from congregational/communal worship.

11. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I engaged in personal prayer on average:

1	2	3	4	5	
Never	1-2 times/week	3-6 times/week		Once a day	More than once per day

12. When I prayed during this time, I experienced a connection or closeness with God/the Divine/a Higher Power.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

13. When I prayed during this time, I felt a connection to others (e.g., those for whom I prayed, ancestors, my faith community, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

14. Check the one that best describes the content of your personal prayers during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic:
    - ___ Formal liturgy (i.e., the Shema, recitation of Psalms, etc.)
    - ___ Personal words that came to me spontaneously
    - ___ Silence
    - ___ I did not engage in personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

15. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic my prayers focused on requests about my health and safety.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

16. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic my prayers focused on requests about the health and safety of others.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

17. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic my prayers focused on expressions of gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

18. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic my prayers focused on seeking forgiveness of wrongdoings.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

19. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic my prayers focused on requests for strength or wisdom to navigate challenges.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

20. During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic my prayers consisted of an openness to receive guidance, peace, or comfort.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

21. Engaging in personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic helped ease my worries and fears.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

22. Engaging in personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic helped me gain clarity regarding difficulties or challenges I was facing.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

23. Please use this space to briefly describe any other benefits you received from engaging in personal prayer during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the next set of questions (#24-27), please answer based on your emotional experience during the past six months (May-October 2022).

24. During the past six months I have experienced feelings of anxiety:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

25. During the past six months I have felt alone:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

26. During the past six months I have felt happy:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

27. During the past six months I have experienced grief:

1	2	3	4	5
None of the time	Small amounts of time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time

For the next set of questions (#28-40), please answer based on your experience with personal prayer during the past six months (May-October 2022). Remember, personal prayers are prayers that are offered on one's own, distinct from congregational/communal worship.

28. During the past six months, I engaged in personal prayer on average:

1	2	3	4	5
Never	1-2 times/week	3-6 times/week	Once a day	More than once per day

29. When I prayed during this time, I experienced a connection or closeness with God/the Divine/a Higher Power.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

30. When I prayed during this time, I felt a connection to others (e.g., those for whom I prayed, ancestors, my faith community, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

31. Check the one that best describes the content of your personal prayers over the past six months:
    ___ Formal liturgy (i.e., the Shema, recitation of Psalms, etc.)
    ___ Personal words that came to me spontaneously
    ___ Silence
    ___ I have not engaged in personal prayer during the past six months.

32. During the past six months my prayers focused on requests about my health and safety.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

33. During the past six months my prayers focused on requests about the health and safety of others.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

34. During the past six months my prayers focused on expressions of gratitude for objects, people, experiences, and circumstances.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

35. During the past six months my prayers focused on seeking forgiveness of wrongdoings.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

36. During the past six months my prayers focused on requests for strength or wisdom to navigate challenges.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

37. During the past six months my prayers consisted of an openness to receive guidance, peace, or comfort.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

38. Engaging in personal prayer over the past six months helped ease my worries and fears.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

39. Engaging in personal prayer over the past six months helped me gain clarity regarding difficulties or challenges I was facing.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

40. Please use this space to briefly describe any other benefits you received from engaging in personal prayer over the past six months.

For the last set of questions (#41-44), please answer based on your general thoughts with personal prayer – not limited to any time frame.

41. Describe any obstacles you face when engaging in personal prayer? (Check all that apply)

___ I do not believe in God.
___ I do not believe that prayer is effective.
___ Prayer has not been helpful to me in the past.
___ I am disappointed that my prayers have not been answered.
___ I do not know the right way to pray.
___ I forget that prayer is available to me.
___ I do not experience any obstacles when engaging in personal prayer.
___ Other: _____

42. I am curious about incorporating a personal prayer practice in my life.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

43. I believe the synagogue should help people of all ages engage with personal prayer.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

44. In the future I would be interested in learning more about developing a personal prayer practice.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

Appendix B - Bulletin Article and Notice in Weekly Congregational Email

As many of you may know, in the fall of 2020, with the full support of our Board of Trustees, I embarked on a different type of sabbatical, pursuing a Doctor of Ministry at Hebrew Union College. For the past two years I have spent my Mondays enrolled in classes studying a variety of topics in the fields of psychology and theology. It has been an incredibly rewarding program, and I am so grateful for the support of my clergy colleagues, Shaare Emeth's staff and our Board who have encouraged me in this pursuit. I have completed my qualifying exam and now, in my last year in the program, I am working on my final demonstration project – a dissertation-like study exploring the role (or lack thereof) of personal prayer in our lives. This study is in partial completion of the Doctor of Ministry degree, and I am hoping that many of you will assist me in my research by filling out an anonymous survey about personal prayer which will be emailed to all members at the end of October. The survey will take no more than 15 minutes to complete, and all survey participants' identities will be kept strictly confidential.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to me at agoldstein@sestl.org. Thank you, in advance, for your assistance and your continuing support.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Andrea Goldstein

Appendix C - Email Sent to Congregational Members at Onset of the Survey

Shalom.
I am hoping you can take a bit of time (10-15 minutes) to complete an anonymous survey on personal prayer that I am conducting as part of my doctoral studies.

Learn more about the background of this survey below or **click here to begin.** *This survey is completely voluntary and should only be filled out one time per person. The link to the survey will be open today (Monday, October 24) through Sunday, November 6.*

In the fall of 2020, with the full support of Shaare Emeth's Board of Trustees, I embarked on a different type of sabbatical, pursuing a Doctor of Ministry at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. For the past two years, I have spent my Mondays enrolled in classes studying a variety of topics in the fields of psychology and theology. It has been an incredibly rewarding program, and I am so grateful for the support of my clergy colleagues, Shaare Emeth's staff, and our Board who have encouraged me in this pursuit. I have completed my qualifying exam and now, in my last year in the program, I am working on my final demonstration project – a dissertation-like quantitative study exploring the role (or lack thereof) of personal prayer in our lives.

Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to complete this survey. Your thoughts and responses will greatly contribute to the work that I am doing.

In gratitude,
Rabbi Andrea Goldstein

Appendix D - Email Sent to Congregants One Week After Survey Had Been Opened

Shalom.
Thank you to those of you who completed the anonymous survey on personal prayer that I am conducting as part of my doctoral studies. If you have not yet done so, I am hoping you can take a bit of time (10-15 minutes) to complete the survey before it closes on the evening of Sunday, November 6.

You can learn more about the background of this survey below or **click here to begin.** *This survey is completely voluntary and should only be filled out one time per person.*

In the fall of 2020, with the full support of Shaare Emeth's Board of Trustees, I embarked on a different type of sabbatical, pursuing a Doctor of Ministry at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. For the past two years, I have spent my Mondays enrolled in classes studying a variety of topics in the fields of psychology and theology. It has been an incredibly rewarding program, and I am so grateful for the support of my clergy colleagues, Shaare Emeth's staff, and our Board who have encouraged me in this pursuit. I have completed my qualifying exam and now, in my last year in the program, I am working on my final demonstration project – a dissertation-like quantitative study exploring the role (or lack thereof) of personal prayer in our lives.

Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to complete this survey. Your thoughts and responses will greatly contribute to the work that I am doing.

In gratitude,
Rabbi Andrea Goldstein