Prayer Protects the World

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Remarks by Oded Wiener, Director-General of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, with responsibility for relations with Diaspora communities and the promotion of interfaith dialogue, at FORUM 7 - "Prayer Protects the World" during the International Meeting for Peace in Assisi, October 25–27, 2026.

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, distinguished religious leaders, dear friends.

Before we shall start, I would like to pay tribute to the community of Sant' Egidio, our hosts.

I have had the privilege of participating in several conferences organized by the Sant'Egidio community, and there is no question of their commitment to peace , and the community significant contribution to awareness and understanding among religions, through productive dialogue and individual face-to-face meetings between leaders from the various religions .

This important conference, expresses the desire that we all share to use dialogue to bring about an exalted and better world, for the benefit of the entire human race.

We have gathered here from different religions, with different languages, histories, and sacred traditions. Yet we share a profound question: Can prayer protect the world? In a time of suffering, division, and violence, can the words we offer to Heaven make a difference here on Earth?

Is prayer merely a request for God to change reality?

Or is prayer the way in which a person changes - and through this change, the entire world can change?

The Jewish answer is more complex. Prayer is not magic.

Prayer is a connection. It is the moment when a person pauses the race, lifts his eyes, and reminds himself that there is something in the world greater than his immediate interests. And in that moment - something within the person himself can change.

I believe that prayer is one of the greatest gifts and blessings given to humanity. It allows each person to establish a direct, unmediated connection with the Creator, whether in solitude or in a congregation. Prayer is not reserved for the powerful, the learned, or the privileged. It is open to every human heart.

In Judaism, prayer accompanies the entire rhythm of life. There are fixed prayers three times a day: morning, afternoon, and evening. There are special prayers on festivals and sacred occasions; prayers of praise and thanksgiving; prayers of petition for personal and national needs; and prayers seeking forgiveness and atonement. Alongside these established forms, a person may speak to God in their own words, at a moment of joy, fear, gratitude, or sorrow.

This variety teaches us something essential. Prayer is not confined to one hour, one building, or one circumstance. It can shape how we greet the morning, how we respond to suffering, and how

we look at another human being.

Every person lives within widening circles: the self, the family, friends, the community, the city, the nation, and finally the entire world. What begins within one human being does not necessarily remain there. A person who cultivates integrity, compassion, and moral courage can influence those around them; their example can travel from one circle to the next.

Sometimes we ask: Who am I? I am only one person in an immense world. What can my prayer, or my conduct, possibly change? Jewish mystical tradition describes the human being as a microcosm, a world in miniature. The life of one person is not insignificant. Consider Mahatma Gandhi: through moral conviction and nonviolent resistance, one individual helped inspire a movement that transformed a nation. We may never lead a nation, but each of us can lead by example in the world entrusted to us.

Let me tell you a famous story in this context.

A scientist was trying to focus on his work, but his young son kept disturbing him and asking for attention. To keep the boy occupied for a long time, the scientist took a page from a magazine on which a map of the world (the globe) was printed. He tore the page into dozens of small pieces, gave them to his son, and said to him: "Here is a puzzle of the Earth. Try to put it back together When you are finished, I will take the time to play with you".

The scientist was certain that the task would take the child many hours, as the boy was unfamiliar with geographic maps. However, after only a few short minutes, the boy returned with the map perfectly assembled.

When the surprised father asked him: "How did you manage to do it so quickly?" the boy replied: "Dad, I didn't know what the world looked like. But when I turned the pieces over, I saw that on the other side, there was a picture of a person. The moment I fixed the person – the world sorted itself out".

Here is a remarkable feature of Jewish prayer: so often, we pray in the plural. We say, ‘Heal us,’ not only ‘Heal me.’ ‘Forgive us,’ not only ‘Forgive me.’ ‘Bless us.’ ‘Hear our voice.’ Even when a Jew stands alone in prayer, the words draw that person into a community of human need. Prayer moves us from ‘I’ toward ‘we.’

This is not merely a matter of grammar. It is a spiritual discipline. My well-being cannot be completely separated from yours. The suffering of another person is not irrelevant to me. And peace that exists only for my own group is not yet the peace for which the world longs.

The Book of Genesis tells us that man was placed in the Garden of Eden to work it, to keep and to guard it. Jewish teaching understands this as a call to responsibility. The world is not ours to exploit without limit. It is entrusted to our care.

When we pray for the world, we should also hear a question addressed to ourselves: What am I doing to protect it?

Our sages teach that whoever saves a single life is regarded as having saved an entire world. This gives us a practical way to face problems that seem impossibly large. We may not be able to heal every wound or end every conflict. But we can help one frightened child, comfort one grieving family, feed one hungry person, or reach across one bitter division. For that person, our action may change the whole world.

There is a simple story of a child walking along a beach after a storm. Thousands of starfish have

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been washed onto the sand, and now, as the sun rose, they were drying up and faced certain death. The child keeps picking them up, one by one, and returning them to the sea. An older man asks, ‘How can you possibly make a difference? There are thousands.’ The child lifts another starfish, returns it to the protective sea. He smiled at the man and said: "For this starfish – it matters a great deal."

Prayer must not become an excuse to remain on the shore. It should give us the courage to bend down and act. Prayer without action risks remaining only words; action without a compassionate heart can lose its direction. Together, prayer and responsibility can become a force for healing.

Prayer can also protect something fragile within us: our ability to see the humanity of those with whom we disagree. In a world of conflict, it is easy to speak of ‘the other’ as if that person were only an enemy, a label, or a threat. But the other is also a human being, with fears, hopes, loved ones, and dignity. Our sages remind us that God desires the heart. A heart transformed by prayer should be less willing to hate and more willing to listen.

In the Book of Exodus, God says, ‘Let them make me a Temple, that I may dwell among them.’ Jewish commentators have drawn attention to the words ‘among them.’ Holiness is not meant to remain locked inside a sacred building. It must find a home in human heart and lives. A true house of prayer sends us back into the world more attentive to its needs.

Here, in this distinguished interreligious gathering, we need not pretend that our traditions are identical. They are not. Each has its own sacred language, teachings, and obligations. Genuine dialogue does not ask us to abandon our convictions. It asks us to bring the deepest moral resources of our faith into a respectful encounter with others.

From within the Jewish tradition, I offer this conviction: we honor prayer most fully when it enlarges our sense of responsibility. The prayer for healing should make us attentive to the sick. The prayer for mercy should make us merciful. The prayer for peace should make us builders of peace. This is a challenge that people of many faiths can recognize, each in the language of their own tradition.

The Jewish text Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, teaches: ‘In a place where there are no people, strive to be a person.’ Perhaps the test of our prayer is not only what we say when we lift our eyes to Heaven, but who we become when we lower them again and see the person standing beside us.

So let us pray with sincerity, and let us act with courage. Let us protect the dignity of one human being, then another, and another. Let us carry the spirit of our prayers beyond the synagogue, the church, the mosque, and every place of worship, into our communities and our shared world.

Can prayer protect the world?

We hope and pray, that the world will change, thanks to the prayers. When it opens our hearts to the Creator, binds us to one another, and inspires us to become people who protect the world.

Thank you.

Source: Sant' Egidio.