
When Saying “Thank you God for Returning My Soul” is (too) Hard to Do¹

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In Jewish tradition, one of the early prayers in the regular morning liturgy addresses God in a very specific way: it offers thanks that on a daily basis God restores our souls to us. This is a custom that reaches back in time nearly two thousand years to the Talmudic era. This prayer is based on the notion that sleep itself is a kind of minor death, and that while we are asleep resting through the night, God takes back and holds our souls, nurturing, keeping, and protecting them. Then, upon one’s waking, God returns the soul to the individual person. A corollary of this idea is that were this interchange not to take place, if God were not to return our souls to us, we simply would die in our sleep, our soul remaining with God.

Known as the *modeh ani* (fem. *modah ani*) literally “I thank you,” it is only a few words in length.

*Modeh (modah) ani lefaneh-kha, melekh hai vekayam
she-heh-hazarta-bi nish-mati b’hem-la. Rabbah emunah-te-kha.*

Thank you God, ever-living ruler, for you returned my soul to me in mercy.
How great is your faithfulness.

Unlike many more elaborate blessings and prayers in the liturgy, the *modeh ani* does not address the deity by name (Y-H-V-H/Adonai/Eternal, God/El/Elohim), although it describes God as both “ever-living” and “ruler.” Further, it credits God as being merciful in returning one’s soul and praises God’s great faithfulness to us by once again completing this task and restoring us to earthly life.

The *modeh ani* prayer was developed from a rabbinic teaching based on a biblical verse that extolls God’s mercies (*rahmav*): “They are new every day, great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:23). According to a midrashic tradition, Rabbi Simeon ben Abba offered this interpretation: “‘They are new every day, great is your faithfulness’ because you [God] renew us [in life] every morning, we know that great is your faithfulness to redeem us” (*Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 78.1; cf. *Midrash Lamentations Rabbah* 3.23.8).

Although it is not expressed specifically in the *modeh ani* prayer, God’s attributes of majesty (“ruler”) and eternity (“ever-living”) serve as a contrast and a comparison to human frailty and limited life. In effect, the prayer offers gratitude to God for providing us with another day of life, another day to engage with the temporal world around us.

Jewish tradition invites us to recite this prayer early each morning. Yet, what if

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one's life is filled with ongoing physical, psychic, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual suffering and pain? What if one appears to be at the end of a terminal illness? Are there situations when thanking God for returning one's soul becomes something simply (too) hard to do? When one's life seems to be so intolerable, so valueless, so bereft of meaning, what would be the reason to say these words? Would one want to pray this prayer, or would reciting it be an example of a fruitless prayer, an empty and meaningless gesture? This article offers several responses to these questions:

1. *Despite all* Physical pain and psychic-emotional-existential suffering are relative matters. In determining the degree of pain/suffering, medical and psychosocial workers often ask the ailing person to define the degree of their dis-ease on a Likert Scale, from tolerable to intolerable, mild to severe, from 1 to 10. Yet, the person may experience ongoing or only occasional difficulties. There may be times during the day or the night when the pain/suffering abates, when, even if only momentarily, there is relief or release. Consequently, a person may recite the *modeh ani* prayer with a cognizance that as bad as life can be, there still are good moments for which to be grateful. Despite all, I still am thankful to be alive to experience this.

2. *Unfinished business* Another possibility might be that the compromised person has what could be termed "unfinished business." This unfinished business might mean unresolved conflicts or an unwillingness to say "goodbye." Such matters may be conscious or subconscious, but the lack of achieving closure can sustain people in their struggle. Thanking God for returning my soul to me then serves as recognition that there still is time to find or achieve some answers, results, or resolution to "finish" whatever needs to be done.

3. *Anger* Some persons who recite the *modeh ani* prayer do so in a spirit of anger. They are hurt, disappointed, bereft, or feel abandoned by others, and/or by God. If such is the case, this anger contains some irony. As noted, the final words of the *modeh ani* prayer, "great is your faithfulness" (*rabbah emunah-te-kha*) are a direct quotation from the biblical book of Lamentations, a text wherein God's voice is conspicuously absent. For five devastatingly pain-filled chapters, the author of Lamentations bewails Jerusalem's destruction, devastation and what appears to be God's indifference to the suffering of Jerusalem's citizens. Here, this prayer assumes the form of either a sarcastic statement or a provocative question. I *thank* you God for returning my soul to me? *Great* is your faithfulness? In its own way, this statement of disquiet empowers people and energizes them, giving them the strength to fight on.

4. *Would that* Other people take a less confrontational approach. Perhaps in sadness, they say in their hearts, "Would that I could say 'I thank you God . . .'" Rather, I pray this prayer because I have prayed it for a long time. It would feel odd not to say it, but the words have little or no meaning to me. I do not really mean the words, but their very familiarity brings comfort to me, even in my great distress."

5. *Distraction* Sometimes the act of prayer becomes a distraction in its own right, altering one's focus, taking one's mind off the ongoing pain and suffering, or the bleakness of one's prognosis. Prayer becomes a neutral island, a safe place to find momentary release and repose. I can lose myself in prayer.

6. *For others* Most people do not live in total isolation. There are loved ones, family, friends, with whom we are connected. The possibility, remains that another (or others) may still benefit from our continued presence. "I still have a purpose in living."

7. *And when it is too hard* There are some who would say that this matter of *not* reciting the *modeh ani* applies *only* in the case when someone appears to be at the end of a terminal illness. For many people there does come a time when all of these options (or other similar possibilities) no longer have meaning. There seem to be no more reasons to say the *modeh ani* – "I give thanks". It is too hard; it is too meaningless. These people may then figuratively turn their face to the wall and die.

A midrashic story relates how an old and frail woman came to her rabbi and said, "I wish to die. I have nothing for which to live." Knowing her circumstances, the rabbi understood her words and her decision. So the rabbi asked her, "What do you do?" She replied. "I go the synagogue each day." The rabbi advised her: stop going to the synagogue. She took this advice, and in a short time she died (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Proverbs #943).

Although focused on a somewhat different issue, a Talmudic story explains that Rabbi Judah was suffering from a terminal illness. When his disciples momentarily interrupted their prayers, which they had assumed were prayed on his behalf, his soul was allowed to return to God (Babylonian Talmud *Ketubot* 104a).

Judaism values and affirms life; it teaches that life, itself, is a gift from God. The Talmud includes the notion that those who are born are destined to die (*Mishna Avot* 4.22). Life is precious; it is also limited. No one lives forever. While Jewish tradition encourages people to live their lives fully and to give thanks for the many blessings one knows day-by-day, it also recognizes that there are natural limits to life. This tradition suggests that while one cannot actively hasten the death of someone unwell, one does not have to engage in extraordinary measures to keep one alive; it is appropriate, passively, to allow death to take place.

"For everything there is a season" counseled Ecclesiastes (Chapter 3), "a time for all things under heaven: A time to gather and a time to let go; a time to live and a time to die." There is a time to say *modeh ani*, and a time to refrain from saying its words. Under select circumstances, not praying the *modeh ani* can be a viable option.



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