

A Year of Reconstructionism

May 2021-Liturgy and Prayer from a Reconstructionist Lens
Congregation Dorshei Emet

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ-הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְעַסֵּק בְּדִבְרֵי-תוֹרָה.
*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu
la'asok b'divrei torah.*

Blessed are You, our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with commandments,
and commanded us to study words of Torah.

R. Eliezer says :

If one makes his prayer a fixed task [keva'], his prayer is not supplication.

What means keva'?

R. Jacob b. Iddi said in the name of R. Osha'ya :

Anyone whose prayer seems to him a burden.

The Rabbis say :

Anyone who does not recite it in language of supplication.

Rabbah and Rab Joseph both said :

Anyone who is not able to add something new to it.

-Talmud Bavli

Vocabulary

Keva	routine, fixed prayers
Kavanah	intention, “spirit”
Siddur	prayerbook, from root “order”
Machzor (Kippur)	prayerbook for the days of awe (Rosh Hashanah and Yom
Tefillah	prayer
Brachah (pl. brachot)	blessing

Nusach	musical pattern for different prayer services
Shacharit	morning prayer service
Maariv	afternoon prayer service
Mincha	evening prayer service
Kabbalat Shabbat	Friday night Shabbat service
Megillah	literally “scroll”-primarily used for the book of Esther on Purim
Haggadah	book used for the Passover seder
Havdalah	Saturday night prayers to end Shabbat
Daven (davenning)	Yiddish-the experience of prayer
Amidah (Shomeneh Esrei)	19 (18) blessings--core prayer of services

Origins

Shimon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say, “The world rests on three things: On Torah, on Avodah (Divine service) and on acts of kindness.”

-Pirkei Avot 1:2

So we will render for bulls [i.e., sacrifices] the offering of our lips [i.e., prayer].

-Hoshea 14:3

Keva or Kavannah?

Prayer without kavanah is no prayer at all. One who has prayed without kavanah ought to pray again (Rambam Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 4: 15).

Hebrew or English or French?

Prayer may be recited in any language. The following may be said in any language... prayer.

-Mishnah, Sotah 7:1

What is the purpose of prayer?

This commandment obligates each person to offer supplication and prayer every day and utter praises of the Holy One, blessed be He; then petition for all his needs

with requests and supplications; and finally, give praise and thanks to God for the goodness that He has bestowed upon him; each one according to his own ability
- Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 1:2

Rabbi Nachman's Prayer

I

Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone.
May it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grasses,
Among all growing things,
There to be alone and enter into prayer.
There may I express all that is in my heart,
Talking with Him to whom I belong.
And may all grasses, trees and plants
Awake at my coming.
Send the power of their life into my prayer,
Making whole my heart and my speech through the life and spirit of growing
things,
Made whole by their transcendent Source.
Oh! That they would enter my prayer!
Then would I fully open my heart in prayer, supplication and holy speech;
Then, O God, would I pour out the words of my heart before Your Presence.

1. Evening Service (Ma'ariv)

1. Shema and its blessings and related passages
2. Shemoneh Esrei
3. Aleinu

2. Morning Service (Shacharit)

1. Morning Blessings
2. P'sukei d'Zimra
3. Shema and its blessings and related passages
4. Shemoneh Esrei
5. Hallel, if appropriate
6. Torah reading (Mondays, Thursdays, Shabbat and holidays)
7. Aleinu, Ashrei (Psalm 145), and other closing prayers, Psalms and hymns (not on Shabbat and holidays; recited at the end of Musaf instead on those days)

3. Additional Service (Musaf) (Shabbat and holidays only; recited immediately after Shacharit)

1. Shemoneh Esrei
2. Aleinu and other closing prayers, Psalms and hymns

4. Afternoon Service (Minchah)

1. Ashrei (Psalm 145)
2. Shemoneh Esrei
3. Aleinu

Dr. Carol Ochs and Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky, Why Do We Pray?

[Dr. Ochs is a professor of Jewish religious Thought and Rabbi Olitzky is the Exec. Dir. of the Jewish Outreach Institute.]

Before we can examine our experiences in prayer, we must answer the question, What motivates us to pray in the first place? According to Jewish

tradition, there are set times for prayer and specific rules for saying spontaneous blessing. But what about prayer itself? What is it that sweeps us heavenward, that causes the words to erupt from our souls, the music to escape from our hearts? We all have occasions in which we might have prayed – we attended services, read the prescribed texts – but nothing genuine seemed to have occurred. We discover to our disappointment that having set hours guarantees nothing. For even when we go through the motion of routine prescribed prayer, it does not mean that we are necessarily praying. Instead of focusing on fixed hours of prayer, we turn our memory toward moments, outside of more formal prayer situations, where there were intense feelings that left us speechless or where our despair suddenly lifted. Those who are led to reflect on their prayer experience try to recapture those moments, create them, call them on demand. We all recognize that this one nagging question about why we pray has generated a quest, a search in time and memory, for experiences of authentic prayer ...

[...]

If we start out with the understanding that prayer is an occasion for an encounter with God, we can never confuse praying with saying prayers. It would be like confusing a genuine conversation with repeating a set piece. There are texts in the prayer service, but it is not on the literal level that they function for the person praying. Some parts of the institutionalized service, repeated once or several times a day, keep the conscious mind occupied while some more hidden aspect of ourselves opens up to an encounter. The words drop away and a deeper engagement occurs.

During the time of the Bible, our people had no prayer books, no collected body of texts that a person referred to when it was time to pray. Even the psalms, the earliest known prayers of our people, whose texts can be found scattered throughout our prayer books, were generally used only in public assembly at the Temple in Jerusalem. As a result, no one could confuse the simple rote recitation of words in the prayer book with the act of praying (a distinction that is often lost today). Real prayer involves opening our self to the reality of God's presence. In

the midst of prayer, we can learn to talk to God about everything our needs, our fears, our sense of shame and guilt,

The function of the formalized prayers our gratitude and wonder. We are able to transcend the words of the prayer text. Our capacity to do so to "fly" is based in part on our deep rootedness in the tradition. We are familiar with this language, these images, the world view presupposed by the tradition. That comfort is precisely what allows our thoughts the freedom to use the given text as a springboard for a wordless relationship.

[Ochs, C. and Olitzky, K. M. Jewish Spiritual Guidance. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997, pp. 31-32, 35.]

The Art of Blessing the Day

from THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY

By Marge Piercy

This is the blessing for rain after drought:
Come down, wash the air so it shimmers,
a perfumed shawl of lavender chiffon.
Let the parched leaves suckle and swell.
Enter my skin, wash me for the little
chrysalis of sleep rocked in your plashing.
In the morning the world is peeled to shining.

This is the blessing for sun after long rain:
Now everything shakes itself free and rises.
The trees are bright as pushcart ices.
Every last lily opens its satin thighs.
The bees dance and roll in pollen
and the cardinal at the top of the pine
sings at full throttle, fountaining.

This is the blessing for a ripe peach:
This is luck made round. Frost can nip
the blossom, kill the bee. It can drop,
a hard green useless nut. Brown fungus,
the burrowing worm that coils in rot can
blemish it and wind crush it on the ground.
Yet this peach fills my mouth with juicy sun.

This is the blessing for the first garden tomato:
Those green boxes of tasteless acid the store sells
in January, those red things with the savor of wet
chalk, they mock your fragrant name. How fat and
sweet you are weighing down my palm, warm as
the flank of a cow in the sun.
You are the savor of summer in a thin red skin.

This is the blessing for a political victory:
Although I shall not forget that things
work in increments and epicycles and sometime
leaps that half the time fall back down,
let's not relinquish dancing while the music
fits into our hips and bounces our heels.
We must never forget, pleasure is real as pain.

The blessing for the return of a favorite cat,
the blessing for love returned, for friends'
return, for money received unexpected,
the blessing for the rising of the bread,
the sun, the oppressed. I am not sentimental
about old men mumbling the Hebrew by rote
with no more feeling than one says gesundheit.

But the discipline of blessings is to taste
each moment, the bitter, the sour, the sweet
and the salty, and be glad for what does not
hurt. The art is in compressing attention
to each little and big blossom of the tree
of life, to let the tongue sing each fruit,
its savor, its aroma and its use.

Attention is love, what we must give
children, mothers, fathers, pets,
our friends, the news, the woes of others.
What we want to change we curse and then
pick up a tool. Bless whatever you can
with eyes and hands and tongue. If you
can't bless it, get ready to make it new.