



## Jewish Prayer *A Brief Guide*

**P**rayer, like any art form, is constantly in tension between the poles of tradition and innovation. Too traditional, and it runs the risk of becoming moribund and unable to connect to contemporary practitioners; too innovative, and it runs the risk of becoming inauthentic and losing touch with the emotional realities that spawned it.

### What is prayer?

I have been praying regularly and irregularly for a number of years, and cannot offer a definitive answer for what prayer *is*, but I can offer some general thoughts.

- Prayer is not a magical incantation which will not “work” if something is said “wrong.”
- Prayer is not a primal howl said absent the echoes of history.
- Prayer is not simple or obvious.
- Prayer can be intensely boring, but there is strength in the comfort that only comes with repetition.
- Prayer is not a choral concert – not all voices need to be in the same place at the same time.
- Praying in Hebrew can be difficult and alienating; praying from a written English text can be flat and banal.

Jewish prayer serves many functions, some more effectively than others. Among them are an opportunity to communicate with the Divine and also an opportunity to bring community together. Prayer (or religion, for that matter) is not the synonymous with “cheerfulness.” It is possible, but not easy, to pray from rage, from anguish, from sorrow.

The players in Jewish prayer are always the individual, the community (in its many constructions), and the Divine (in its many constructions). At various points during the conversation of prayer, the speaker and the listener change roles.

When I began to pray in a Jewish setting, I thought that the rabbi was the performer and I was the audience, ready to be carried away like a concert-goer at a show. I’ve come to realize that in many ways, *I* am the “performer” and the Creator of the Universe was the audience, ready to be carried away by me.



## Thoughts on how to find a way in

- Pray in places that have the power to reconnect us to the power of the Divine, which sometimes feels far away. Pray in a cemetery. Pray at dawn. Pray in public. Pray in a maternity ward. Pray at the ocean.
- Say it like you mean it – true conversation has a tonal quality which conveys a tremendous amount of meaning. We raise our voices; we speed up and slow down. We shout. Prayer is a conversation, not a recitation - vary the tone of your prayers. Pray in a mighty scream. Pray so that nobody can hear your secrets.
- Pray one verse again and again so that its meaning is rewritten by your tone and cadence.
- On occasion, pray exclusively with your gender. There is power in diversity, and there is power in homogeneity as well.
- Lead your community, even if only for one prayer.
- Move around. Pray while walking. Don't sit down.
- Enjoy the rhythms of Hebrew; feel free to leave the text and pray from the heart in English.

## The Guide to the Service

The following pages are designed to give a very brief overview of the daily morning (*shacharit*) service – its main components, and the prayers that make them up. The charts represent a standard *matbeah* (order of service) in a traditional egalitarian setting. The page numbers are from Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals, which is what we use here at BHA.

Finally, if there are any questions, don't hesitate to ask.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Rabbi Brent Spodek".

Rabbi Brent Spodek