

**Adult Bnei Mitzvah Class 5781**  
**Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun**

**SESSION 1 – INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH PRAYER**

- Why do we have fixed prayers – wouldn't "praying from the heart" be better?
- Why aren't the prayers written in plain English?
- Why do Jews traditionally pray three times a day, saying the same thing? Isn't that boring? How do we "pray from the heart" when the words are always the same?

**1. Fixed prayer vs. Prayer From the Heart (*Kevah* vs. *Kavanah*)**

A. **Judaism is a religion of community** – there is strength in community. But that requires commitment and obligation on the part of individuals. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh*.

- 1) Having a community do it together at a fixed time helps us to focus our attention. Left to our own devices, we might not ever sit down and do this.
- 2) We also get strength from each other, knowing that is what we are all doing at this time. (Like going to the gym with a partner.)
- 3) Many of the prayers are written in the plural because we are doing this as a community as well as individually.
- 4) And of course, once we are praying as a community, we need a fixed liturgy so that everyone can "be on the same page". These prayers give us a connection to Jewish communities all over the world as well as with our ancestors for centuries.

B. **Fixed prayers form a checklist** for us as individuals to make sure we don't forget something. May not find each item meaningful in a prayer – so skip those parts. Dwell on the parts that do mean something to you in your life right now.

C. **Most of us are not wordsmiths**. These prayers were composed by experts, poets, literary geniuses. They are carefully crafted. It is as if we are praying with words put together by Shakespeare.

D. **Ultimately, it is of course essential that we pray from the heart. We must add our own thoughts to the prayers while we recite them.**

**2. Hebrew vs. English**

A. **Hebrew is the language of our people** – historically and all over world. We do have **translations** in the Prayer book, but not precise. Helpful, though, to get a pretty good idea of what the prayers mean. But, always lose something in translation.

B. Real problem is that **the Hebrew is poetry** – hard to translate. But beautiful **works of art**. **Metaphoric** language. Don't focus on metaphor but what it is trying to convey – **don't look at telescope, but through it.**

### 3. History of Jewish Communal Worship

- A. **Temple sacrifices** and worship service (fantasy tour of Temple Mount with Levites and Priests, **Choir, Orchestra, Psalms**)
- B. The **Daily Sacrifice – Twice a Day** => **Shaharit** (morning) and **Minhah** (afternoon) Amidah
- C. **Shema and its blessings** recited Twice a Day => Night (**Ma'ariv**) and Morning (**Shaharit**)
- D. The Ma'ariv service – we now add the Amidah
- E. **Musaf** service – for the “extra” sacrifice brought on New Moons, Shabbat and Festivals
- F. How can we say the same words all the time and not get bored, or mouth the words without thinking about what they mean? (means different things at different times)

### 4. Practical Praying

- A. Realize that every time you pray does not have to be a spiritual high, but (as with exercise) if you don't set aside fixed times to pray, it's likely you won't – and you'll get “out of shape”
- B. Use the English to understand the prayer better. Try not to be frustrated by the translation, and think of it as a challenge of interpreting poetry.
- C. Focus on the themes of the prayers instead of the details.
- D. Add your own thoughts to the prayers.
- E. Bring supplementary reading with you on themes or particular issue you want to work on.
- F. Sometimes you can let the music move you instead of (in spite of?) the words. (Analogy to Michelangelo's paintings in **St. Peter's Cathedral**)
- G. Keep the goal in mind: to come closer to your Creator, to come closer to your family, friends and community, to remind yourself of what is truly important (goals, aspirations, ideals), and to be a responsible member of the Jewish community

### **Bibliography for further reading on Jewish Prayer:**

Hammer, Reuven *Entering Jewish Prayer*. (Schocken, 1994) Discusses history, development and meaning of our liturgy. (Also *Entering the High Holy Days* by the same author which does the same for the High Holy Day liturgy.)

Donin, Hayim Halevy *To Pray as a Jew* (Basic Books, 1980) (A how-to book covering all the basics.)

Heschel, Abraham Joshua *Man's Quest for God* (beautiful exploration of the meaning and purpose of prayer)

# CHART OF JEWISH COMMUNAL PRAYER SERVICES

<u>Daily Services</u>	<u>Preliminary Prayers</u>	<u>Shema and Its Blessings</u>	<u>Amidah</u>	<u>Closing Prayers</u>
{ <b>Shaharit</b> (Morning)	<b>Birkot Hashahar/ Psukei d'zimra</b>	<b>Yotzer Or, Ahavah Rabbah Shema, Emet v'yatziv</b>	<b>19 blessings weekday 7 blessings Shabbat</b>	<b>Kedushah d'sidra, Aleynu</b>
	<b>Musaf</b> ("Extra") (on Shabbat, Festivals, Rosh Hodesh)	NONE	NONE	<b>Same</b>
{ <b>Minhah</b> (Afternoon)	<b>Ashrei</b>	NONE	<b>Same</b>	<b>Aleynu</b>
	<b>Ma'ariv</b> (Evening)	<b>Vehu rahum</b>	<b>Ma'ariv aravim, Ahaavat Olam, Shema, Emet V'emunah Hashkivenu</b>	<b>Same</b>  <b>Aleynu</b>

## TORAH SERVICE

**MORNINGS** of Mondays, Thursdays and Shabbat/Festival/Rosh Hodesh/Fast Days/Hanukkah/Purim  
**AFTERNOONS** of Shabbat, Yom Kippur  
**EVENING** of Simhat Torah