

Adult Bnei Mitzvah Class 5781

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SESSION 4 – THE AMIDA – FIRST THREE BLESSINGS

1. History of the Amidah

- a. Talmud suggests it was created by “Men of the Great Assembly” in early Second Temple period.
- b. But modern scholars believe it is more likely to have been fixed (in terms of the structure/outline of the 18 (19) blessings) after Temple is razed.

Berakhot 28b

Shimon HaPekoli arranged the order of eighteen benedictions before Rabban Gamliel at Yavneh.

שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על הסדר ביבנה

- c. The Talmud seems to suggest that the 19th blessing was the “Birkat haminin”.

Berakhot 28b

Rabban Gamliel said to the sages “Is there no one who knows how to establish a prayer against the heretics?” Shmuel HaKatan stood up and established it.

אמר להם רבן גמליאל לחכמים כלום יש אדם שיודע לתקן ברכת המינים? עמד שמואל הקטן ותקנה

But modern scholars – based on early manuscripts – believe that this blessing was only revised at that time, and that the 19th blessing was really created by splitting what was one blessing into two: blessing numbers 14 (building Jerusalem) and 15 (establishing the throne of David).

2. Purpose of Amidah

- a. Replaces daily sacrifices (morning and afternoon)
- b. Evening Amidah added later – originally optional. Still remnant of that because we do not do a (prayer-leader’s) repetition of Amidah in evening. It is the communal Amidah that replaces the sacrifice – need a minyan, and it is the repetition by the prayer-leader that counts.
- c. But the private Amidah also has specific purpose: Private audience before God. “Laundry list” of things you might want to say to God. Like entering the Throne Room of a King. (Or, like Dorothy and her friends entering the throne room of The Great and Powerful Oz.) Hence, the choreography of three steps back and three steps forward.

3. Avot – The First Blessing

- a. Coming before God not as individual, but as member of people who have long history of relationship with God. (Like Dorothy coming with her friends ...)
- b. God of history.
- c. “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob”

- i. Exodus 3:6 (cf. 3:15) Moses first encounter with God at burning bush. So, this reference can also mean for us “God of Moses”: indicates reverence we should have when reciting it, and perhaps indicates opportunity for revelation if we allow it – Moses “turned aside to see the bush” our opportunity to stop and turn aside and tune in to God.
- ii. Exodus 3:15: “This shall be my name forever, this shall be my appellation forever.”
- iii. Each had individual relationship to God, hence “Elohai” is repeated. We can meditate on those different relationships as we recite blessing.
- d. “Great, mighty and awesome” from Moses (Deut. 10:17, read context!) and decreed by “Men of Great Assembly” - no more, no less - Megillah 25a
- e. “God most high, creator of heaven and earth” Gen. 14:19, Melechtzedek blessing Abraham after victory
- f. “Shield of Abraham” Gen. 15:1
- g. Adding “Founding Mothers” (*Imahot*)

4. **Gevurot – The Second Blessing**

- a. God’s powers – even over death, the most miraculous power
- b. Dispute between Sadducees and Pharisees over resurrection. No wonder made resurrection prominent in this early blessing. Sadducee would not be able to be prayer leader. The concept is not really found in the Torah as the Pharisees insisted. (Sanhedrin Chapter 10:1 - "All Israel have a portion in the world to come - except ... one who does not believe that resurrection is found in the Torah." Deuteronomy commands us not to consort with dead. King Saul does. (I Sam. 28:8-19) So there seems to be some belief in a life after death in the Bible. But on the other hand Psalms say “the dead do not praise you”. (Ps. 115:17) Is our ancient reluctance to dwell on life after death a reaction to Egyptian death-worship? Afraid it would spoil pure monotheism to worship ancestors?
- c. But concept of Life After Death comes back into Judaism more strongly in Second Temple times, perhaps as result of Maccabbean persecution by Greeks. (See II Mac. 7:9, 12:43-45) Not clear there whether it is bodily resurrection, though. But later Pharisees assert it is. Maimonides says just a phase and will die again.
- d. Many today are troubled by literal reading of this text. Reform Judaism changes wording to “gives life to everything.” Perhaps we can give a modern interpretation of this phrase as creating the first life from inanimate objects. Perhaps immortality through progeny, or through the deeds we have done, creations of our minds and spirits, and inspirations we have given to others. Perhaps daily renewal of life is referred to (note that bringing rain in winter is inserted in this prayer – indicates renewal of life *is* part of the prayer because the rains bring renewed life to plants, trees, etc. after they have "died" in cold of Winter)
- e. Perhaps can say we just don’t really understand what exactly this might mean, as we don’t understand many details in complex universe, and this is just a symbol, words that convey a direction of thought, not a definition. God’s power extends beyond the realm of

life and death, “the meaning and significance of human life extends beyond the realm of this earth and this universe.” (Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*, p. 168)

- f. Enumerates the “acts of lovingkindness” referred to in first blessing. We imitate God in doing these (see midrash at Birkot hashachar in *Siddur Sim Shalom*) Core of this enumeration of God's acts of kindness based on Psalm 146:7-8.

5. **Kedushah – The Third Blessing and the Climax of Amidah**

- a. Holiness, awesome, transcendence. Wonder of mysterious presence. Like Jacob’s ladder (Gen. 28:17). Not God in history or in nature (power) but God in God’s essence. Incomprehensible by humans, yet experienced. Note brevity of prayer – because what can you say about God’s essence?
- b. Repetition of Kedushah (different for different days, and different countries) based on three biblical passages: Isaiah 6:3, Ezekiel 3:12, and Psalm 146:10).
- c. Merkavah mystics used these verses to induce ecstatic intimacy with the Holy One. They probably inserted this prayer into Amidah so that the average Jew could have a “knock off” mystical experience. While prayerbook is for the masses, and therefore mysticism (which is dangerous if not done properly) was left out of prayerbook, this prayer comes closest to that aspect of Judaism. (See Elbogen, pp. 54-62 and 287-288)
- d. God is source of holiness, but we are commanded to be holy like God. (Lev. 19) We attempt to imitate God’s moral and ethical qualities.
- e. **Isaiah 6:1-7** (*Etz Hayim* pp. 452-453) Isaiah is commissioned to be God’s Messenger (Prophet) and sees God’s Throne Room. Angels with six wings, fluttering about God’s throne. “And one would call to the other and say, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of Hosts. The whole world is filled with his Presence.’” (We bounce on our feet as we say “Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh” in order to imitate the angels fluttering around God’s throne. We “become” God’s angels.)
- f. **Ezekiel 1:1-28, 3:12** (*Etz Hayim* pp. 1321-1324) Ezekiel is commissioned to be God’s Messenger (Prophet) and sees God’s Throne Room. Angels have four faces: human, lion, eagle, ox. (v. 10) (Faces are like “icons” representing the “essence” of each of these creatures: lion is fierce king of the jungle; eagle can fly/soar, takes care of its young, has keen vision; ox is strong and powerful; human is intelligent, can be God’s moral agent.) Two legs fused together into one. (v. 7) (That’s why we stand during the Kedushah with our feet fused together ourselves.) “Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: ‘Blessed is the Presence of the LORD, in His place.’” (3:12)
- g. **Psalms 146:10** “The LORD will reign forever, your God, o Zion, [will rule] from generation to generation. Praise the LORD.” (*Siddur Lev Shalem* p. 137) Possibly, inserted here by author of Kedushah as prayer for Messianic era to begin. Now that we have experienced God’s Presence in intimate way, we desire for this Presence to be manifest in OUR world all the time. (See the context of this verse in the prayer – especially the paragraph above it.)
- h. **Kedushah = Jacob** (see below) Stairway to Heaven, first encounter of God in Heaven/Throne room.

- “Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!” “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.” (Genesis 28:16-17, *Etz Hayim* p. 167f)
- Perhaps God can be found anywhere we look for Him. Right here. Right now. And especially in the climax of the Amidah – the Kedushah.

i. Bringing Holiness into THIS World

- A. MY (modern) interpretation of the insertion of verse from Psalm 146, based on context of the verse in the Psalm and modern theological perspective.
 - B. Psalm 146 (p. 137): God brings justice to the oppressed, provides food for the hungry, frees the captive, gives sight to the blind, straightens those who have been bent over, loves the righteous people, guards the stranger, supports the orphans and widows, etc.
 - C. **But, does God actually do these things?** If so, why is the world so morally imperfect? Rather, **we** do these things **for** God. **We are God’s hands and feet** in making the world more fair, just, kind, and good, by doing these things and more.
 - D. Kedushah then represents reaching the heights of God’s throne, making an intimate connection with God. But then returning to earth and this world having been commissioned by God (as Isaiah and Ezekiel were) to bring peace, justice and kindness into it.
6. The first three blessings of Amidah were later understood to correspond to the three Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Abraham first to recognize God’s greatness. Isaac and resurrection (from binding of Isaac story). Jacob experiences God’s holiness when dreamed of ladder to heaven. Elaborate piyutim were written to reflect this structure.

Biblical Texts:

Deuteronomy Chapter 10

¹²And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the LORD your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and soul, ¹³keeping the LORD's commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good. ¹⁴Mark, the heavens *c*-to their uttermost reaches-*c* belong to the LORD your God, the earth and all that is on it! ¹⁵Yet it was to your fathers that the LORD was drawn in His love for them, so that He chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all peoples—as is now the case. ¹⁶Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. ¹⁷For the LORD your God is *d*-God supreme and Lord supreme, -*d* **the great, the mighty, and the awesome God**, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, ¹⁸but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing.—
¹⁹You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Psalm 146

¹Hallelujah.

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

²I will praise the LORD all my life, sing hymns to my God while I exist.

³Put not your trust in the great, in mortal man who cannot save.

⁴His breath departs; he returns to the dust; on that day his plans come to nothing.

⁵Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

⁶maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

⁷who secures justice for those who are wronged,

gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets prisoners free;

⁸The LORD restores sight to the blind;

the LORD makes those who are bent stand straight;

the LORD loves the righteous;

⁹The LORD watches over the stranger;

He gives courage to the orphan and widow,

but makes the path of the wicked tortuous.

¹⁰**The LORD shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.**

Hallelujah.