

Maariv Dvar Tefillah ~ Lia Katz

In just a few minutes, when we say Maariv, we will say the individual Amidah, the silent prayer. This prayer is said silently, by every individual during the morning, afternoon and evening prayers, and is repeated by the Chazzan publicly and collectively in the morning and afternoon. Which makes me wonder – why do we not include a public repetition at Maariv? Or, alternatively, why do we repeat this prayer during the morning and afternoon services? What is the origin for both the repetition in the morning and afternoon, and the lack of repetition in the evening?

The answer can be partially found in this week's torah portion.

Immediately before Isaac meets Rebecca, we are told that "Yitzchak Yazah Lasuach Basadeh Lifnot Erev" "Isaac went out to meditate in the field before the evening."

Some of the Rabbis in their commentary ascribe this moment as the origin of the Mincha prayer. This group of Rabbis argues that the daily prayers, the morning shacharit, the afternoon mincha and the nightly maariv, originate with the forefathers: Abraham who prayed in the morning, Isaac who meditated in the afternoon and Jacob who prayed at night.

There is a second group of Rabbis who argue that the origin of the prayers is rather in the sacrifices that were made in the Temple. Shacharit is representative of the morning sacrifice which could be brought until midday; Mincha is representative of the afternoon sacrifice which could be brought until evening; and Maariv is representative of the leftovers of those sacrifices which, if not consumed during the day, could be brought at night.

At first glance, this debate seems purely theoretical. After all, while it's intellectually interesting to think about the origins of the prayers that we recite, this argument, not at all focused on the meaning of the prayers, but on their time of day, doesn't seem to have much impact on our religious or spiritual lives.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, however, in his book on Genesis, argues that this distinction between the 'prayers as a tradition from our forefathers' and the 'prayers as a representation of the sacrifices in the Temple' goes right to the heart of the nature of prayer itself.

He points to two distinct types of leadership within the Jewish community of Biblical times.

First, the patriarchs and prophets were individuals with special gifts and a special relationship with God. They are represented by the forefathers, yes, but also by Rachel, Moses, Miriam, Chana. They are moved and inspired to speak to God, their prayers are their own. This is the patriarchal prayer, the prophetic prayer, the individual prayer.

The other religious leadership was the priest. He served God, the word Avodah (work, or service) is ascribed to his efforts, and everything about his relationship with religious practice was proscribed in strict rules, about timing, location, and precisely defined rituals. There is no room for improvisation or spontaneity in the practice of the priest.

The first, the prayer represented by the prophets, is the 'now', the immediate, and the individual relationship with prayer; the priestly service represents longevity, eternity and community. They speak to different aspects of society, and religious need: without spontaneity, the individual is stifled, and there is no space for the spirit. Without structure, society lapses into chaos.

It's worth noting that Judaism is a religion and a community; both aspects are important, and we maintain both aspects in our prayers today. And that is the answer to my original question.

We say the Amidah – the silent prayer – twice during Shacharit and Mincha – first as individuals, and then collectively as a community. The silent prayer is in the tradition of Abraham, Isaac,

Jacob, Rachel and Hannah – private, personal, and can include individualized requests. The public repetition is in the tradition of the sacrifices or the priestly work – public, collective and follows the proscribed rules and rituals. The evening prayer, which does not have a matching evening sacrifice, only has the individual prayer.

And so, we preserve both aspects of prayer, the individual meditation, necessary to a fulfilling spiritual experience, and the collective prayer, necessary to maintaining a community; both are a part of the ongoing tradition and the connect us back to the vast history that comes before us.

Shabbat Shalom.