PEARL: Providing Education and Resources for Leadership

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Rabbi Shawn Zevit

Liturgy and Prayer

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Jewish Reconstructionist Federation

Transformative Judaism for the 21st Century

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Opening Prayers

As the power that makes for world order and personal salvation, God is not a person but a Process. Nevertheless, our experience of that Process is entirely personal…Critics of the conception of God as Process object to it on the ground that it reduces prayer to a form of talking to oneself. In a sense that is true, but we must understand in *what* sense it is true. All thinking- and prayer is a form of thought- is essentially a dialogue between our purely individual egocentric self and our self as representing a process that goes on beyond us…When we establish contact with the Process that makes for human salvation, we can do so only through an appeal to a higher self that represents the working of the Process within us. From that higher self, which is identical with our conscience, the moral censor of our acts, and which represents God as operative in our life, we seek the answer to prayer.

Questions Jews Ask, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (Recon Press, 1956, p. 105-6)

When we worship in public we know our life is part of a larger life, a wave of an ocean of being- the first-hand experience of that larger life which is God.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, Kol Haneshamah Shabbat Vehagim, p. 57 (Recon Press)

Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self… A soul without prayer is a soul without a home.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, quoted in Kol Haneshamah Shabbat Vehagim, p. 57 (Recon Press) p. 744

Do not think that the words of prayer
As you say them
Go up to God.
It is not the words themselves that ascend;
It is rather the burning desire of your heart
That rises like smoke toward heaven.
If your prayer consists only of words and letters,
And does not contain your heart's desire-
How can it rise up to God?

Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav (translated by Rabbi Arthur Green and Barry Holtz)
quoted in Kol Haneshamah Shabbat Vehagim, p. 746

Mordecai Kaplan on Prayer:

Before worship (private prayer) can have any genuine spiritual influence upon us, before it an reveal God to us, we must qualify ourselves by an arduous discipline in deeds of self-control, honesty, courage and kindness. When we come to synagogue, after having tried our utmost to deal fairly with our neighbor, to suppress our evil impulses, and having met our responsibilities as human beings, then worship can yield its measure of spiritual strength and give us a sense of inward peace. Communion with God is a reward of holy and righteous living.

The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, p.262

Liturgy and Prayer

http://jrf.org/showres&rid=487

This series of questions addresses Reconstructionist approaches to Jewish ideas and practices, and was developed by Rabbi Shawn Zevit in response to frequent questions by prospective affiliates, in consultation with numerous other clergy and lay leaders. It is up to our member communities and their leadership, in consultation with JRF, to come to their own standards and ritual practices. We see our rituals, customs, laws, sacred texts and practices coming out of the evolving religious civilization that is the Jewish people in its ongoing relationship with God. We seek practices that reveal holiness and godliness in the world. We see the tradition as having a vote, not a veto in Jewish practice and try to balance tradition with contemporary sensibilities and innovations.

1. "How do Reconstructionists approach sacred texts?

We consider our sacred texts to be the product of inspired experience in the human search for God and holiness in our world. To us, they are neither literal transcriptions from a Supernatural Being nor anachronisms that are mere constructs and fictions. We value our dialogue with the voices of our sacred texts because of the passion, values, aspirations and wisdom they express and how they therefore inform and shape our current Jewish lives.

Torah study, or *Talmud Torah*, has been an integral part of Reconstructionism since its inception. To some degree, this is due to the fact that we study in order to understand the history and the values inherent in the ritual practices under consideration by the community. Hence, many communities form regular, ongoing *havurot* (study groups) as an essential component of adult education programming. In addition, we regard the study of our sacred texts as one path in the search for holiness in our world, inspiring many of our congregations to offer ongoing study groups "*lishma*" simply for the sake of learning.

2. How does Reconstructionism regard Halakah/Jewish Law and Jewish tradition?

Halakah - literally 'the path' or 'the way' - serves to guide the manner in which the individual and community lives its Jewish life. In so doing, halakah relies upon our rich cultural heritage. We see *halakah* as informing Jewish practice because of its contribution to the moral and spiritual life of the Jewish people. Our decision making process reflects Mordecai Kaplan's founding philosophy that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. Therefore, our decision making process embodies both past and present by infusing our 'path' with the ethics and values that are our legacy as well as the realities of our present cultural lives. Decision making is a dynamic, community-driven and, perhaps most importantly, self-conscious process which reflects our philosophy of living in two civilizations.

3. How do Reconstructionists approach God?

Reconstructionism, which proposes a religious humanist theology, sees God as a Power or Process working through nature and human beings. It is therefore incumbent upon us to bring divinity into the world through our actions, thereby increasing God's presence in our physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual lives, as individuals and as faith-based communities. For example, instead of speaking of a just, kind, compassionate God, we might state that justice, kindness and compassion are Godly and we commit to self-consciously live according to these values. Approaching God in this manner enables us to perceive the holy in our daily lives and to infuse our interactions with an element of the Divine. This communal understanding of God co-exists with a wide variety of personally held beliefs.

4. What do Reconstructionist services look like?

Reconstructionist services are fully egalitarian, inclusive and participatory. The Kol Haneshamah prayer book series offers a full and creative liturgy, giving communities the option of using more or less Hebrew during services. For the vast majority of Reconstructionist Jews, wearing *tallit* and *kipa* is common practice for both men and women. Integrating music into the spoken service is not uncommon, encourages participation and enhances the spirit of the day. In so doing, we sanctify all forms of Jewish expression and art.

We recognize a wide range of individual communal practices and approaches to prayer. On a practical level, some congregations focus on Friday night services while others stress Shabbat morning community worship and learning. Still others regularly hold both. Congregations often hold family services and services designed for those just entering Jewish prayer.

5. What is the movement stance on women's role in services?

We have always been dedicated to being fully and consistently egalitarian. We pride ourselves in being the only movement that has always ordained women and the first Jewish community to hold a formal *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony in synagogue over 70 years ago. All our prayerbooks are gender neutral. In all areas of ritual, hiring and governance, our member communities must demonstrate a full commitment to egalitarian principles.

Prayer can be electric and alive. Prayer can touch the soul, burst forth a creative celebration of the spirit, and open deep wells of gratitude, longing and praise. Jewish prayer in its essence is soul dialogue and calls us into relationship within and beyond.

We intuitively know when group prayer is working. Through the power of ancient and modern words and melodies, we venture into realms of deep emotion and find longing, sorrow, hope, wholeness, connection and peace. When guided by skilled leaders of prayer and ritual, our complacency is challenged, we can break through outworn assumptions about God and ourselves, and emerge refreshed and inspired to meet the challenges our lives offer. As rabbis, educators and prayer leaders, we aspire to meaningful prayer and ritual. How does one learn to create transformational spiritual experiences that will vitalize our communities?

Rabbi Marcia Prager and Rabbi Shawn Zevit

Jewish Worship (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_services)

HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language" \o "Hebrew language" Hebrew:
HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language" \o "Hebrew language" Hebrew:
davnen 'to pray') are the prayer recitations that form part of the observance of Judaism. These prayers, often with instructions and commentary, are found in the *siddur*, the traditional Jewish prayer book.

Traditionally, three prayer services are recited daily:

HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_(language)" \o "Hebrew
) "morning light,"
), the afternoon prayers named for the flour offering that accompanied sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem,
), from "nightfall."

Additional prayers:

, "additional") are recited by Orthodox and Conservative congregations on Shabbat, major Jewish holidays (including Chol HaMoed), and Rosh Chodesh.
, "closing"), is recited only on Yom Kippur.

According to the Talmud, prayer is a Biblical commandment[1] and the Talmud gives two reasons why there are three basic prayers: to recall the daily sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, and/or because each of the Patriarchs instituted one prayer: Abraham the morning, Isaac the afternoon and Jacob the evening.[2] A distinction is made between individual prayer and communal prayer, which requires a quorum known as a *minyan*, with communal prayer being preferable as it permits the inclusion of prayers that otherwise must be omitted.

Maimonides (1135–1204 CE) relates that until the Babylonian exile (586 BCE), all Jews composed their own prayers, but thereafter the sages of the Great Assembly composed the main portions of the *siddur*.[3] Modern scholarship dating from the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement of 19th Century Germany, as well as textual analysis influenced by the 20th Century discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, suggests that dating from this period there existed "liturgical formulations of a communal nature designated for particular occasions and conducted in a centre totally independent of Jerusalem and the Temple, making use of terminology and theological concepts that were later to become dominant in Jewish and, in some cases, Christian prayer."[4] The language of the prayers, while clearly from the Second Temple period[*citation needed*] (516 BCE–70 CE), often employs Biblical idiom. Jewish prayerbooks emerged during the early Middle Ages during the period of the Geonim of Babylonia (6th–11th Centuries CE)[5]

Over the last two thousand years variations have emerged among the traditional liturgical customs of different Jewish communities, such as Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Yemenite, Hassidic, and others, however the differences are minor compared with the commonalities. Most of the Jewish liturgy is sung or chanted with traditional melodies or trope. Synagogues may designate or employ a professional or lay *hazzan* (cantor) for the purpose of leading the congregation in prayer, especially on Shabbat or holidays.

The siddur

Main article: siddur

The earliest parts of Jewish prayer are the *Shema Yisrael* ("Hear O Israel") (Deuteronomy 6:4 *et seq*), and the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24-26), which are in the Torah. A set of eighteen (currently nineteen) blessings called the *Shemoneh Esreh* or the *Amidah* (Hebrew, "standing [prayer]"), is traditionally ascribed to the Great Assembly in the time of Ezra, at the end of the Biblical period.

The name *Shemoneh Esreh*, literally "eighteen", is an historical anachronism, since it now contains nineteen blessings. It was only near the end of the Second Temple period that the eighteen prayers of the weekday Amidah became standardized. Even at that time their precise wording and order was not yet fixed, and varied from locale to locale. Many modern scholars believe that parts of the Amidah came from the Hebrew apocryphal work Ben Sira.

According to the Talmud, soon after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem a formal version of the Amidah was adopted at a rabbinical council in Yavne, under the leadership of Rabban Gamaliel II and his colleagues. However, the precise wording was still left open. The order, general ideas, opening and closing lines were fixed. Most of the wording was left to the individual reader. It was not until several centuries later that the prayers began to be formally fixed. By the Middle Ages the texts of the prayers were nearly fixed, and in the form in which they are still used today.

The siddur was printed by Soncino in Italy as early as 1486, though a siddur was first mass-distributed only in 1865. The siddur began appearing in the vernacular as early as 1538. The first English translation, by Gamaliel ben Pedahzur (a pseudonym), appeared in London in 1738; a different translation was released in the United states in 1837.[12]

Readings from the Torah (five books of Moses) and the Nevi'im ("Prophets") form part of the prayer services. To this framework various Jewish sages added, from time to time, various prayers, and, for festivals especially, numerous hymns.

The earliest existing codification of the prayerbook was drawn up by Rav Amram Gaon of Sura, Babylon, about 850 CE. Half a century later Rav Saadia Gaon, also of Sura, composed a siddur, in which the rubrical matter is in Arabic. These were the basis of Simcha ben Samuel's Machzor Vitry (11th century France), which was based on the ideas of his teacher, Rashi. Another formulation of the prayers was that appended by Maimonides to the laws of prayer in his Mishneh Torah: this forms the basis of the Yemenite liturgy, and has had some influence on other rites. From this point forward all Jewish prayerbooks had the same basic order and contents.

Philosophy of prayer

HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_philosophy" \o "Jewish philosophy" Jewish HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbinic_literature" \o "Rabbinic literature" HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflexive_verb" \o "Reflexive verb" reflexive form , to judge. Thus, “to pray” conveys the notion of “judging oneself”.[13] ultimately, the purpose of prayer—

The rationalist approach

In this view, ultimate goal of prayer is to help train a person to focus on divinity through philosophy and intellectual contemplation. This approach was taken by Maimonides and the other medieval rationalists

The educational approach

In this view, prayer is not a conversation. Rather, it is meant to inculcate certain attitudes in the one who prays, but not to influence. This has been the approach of Rabbenu Bachya, Yehuda Halevy, Joseph Albo, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. This view is expressed by Rabbi Nosson Scherman in the overview to the Artscroll Siddur (p. XIII); note that Scherman goes on to also affirm the Kabbalistic view (see below).

Kabbalistic view

Kabbalah (esoteric Jewish mysticism) uses a series of kavanot, directions of intent, to specify the path the prayer ascends in the dialog with God, to increases its chances of being answered favorably. Kabbalists ascribes a higher meaning to the purpose of prayer, which is no less than affecting the very fabric of reality itself, restructuring and repairing the universe in a real fashion. In this view, every word of every prayer, and indeed, even every letter of every word, has a precise meaning and a precise effect. Prayers thus literally affect the mystical forces of the universe, and repair the fabric of creation.

This approach has been taken by the Chassidei Ashkenaz (German pietists of the Middle-Ages), the Zohar, the Arizal's Kabbalist tradition, the Ramchal, most of Hassidism, the Vilna Gaon and Jacob Emden.

Denominational variations

Conservative services generally use the same basic format for services as in Orthodox Judaism with some doctrinal leniencies and some prayers in English. In practice there is wide variation among Conservative congregations. In traditionalist congregations the liturgy can be almost identical to that of Orthodox Judaism, almost entirely in Hebrew (and Aramaic), with a few minor exceptions, including excision of a study session on Temple sacrifices, and modifications of prayers for the restoration of the sacrificial system. In more liberal Conservative synagogues there are greater changes to the service, with 20% to 50% of the service in English, abbreviation or omission of many of the preparatory prayers, and the replacement of some traditional prayers with more contemporary forms. There are often also additional changes for doctrinal reasons, including more egalitarian language, additional excisions of references to the Temple in Jerusalem and sacrifices, elimination of special roles for Kohanim and Levites, etc.

Reform and Reconstructionist use a format which is based on traditional elements, but contains language more reflective of liberal belief than the traditional liturgy. Doctrinal revisions which may vary from congregation to congregation but generally include revising or omitting references to traditional doctrines such as bodily resurrection, a personal Jewish Messiah, and other elements of traditional Jewish eschatology, Divine revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, angels, conceptions of reward and punishment, and other personal miraculous and supernatural elements. Services are often from 40% to 90% in the vernacular.

Reconstructionist, Reform and Renewal services often play instrumental or recorded music with prayers on the Jewish Sabbath. All Reconstructionist, Reform and Renewal synagogues are Egalitarian with respect to gender roles.

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How Can Reconstructionists Pray?

By Jacob Staub

Reconstructionists are not atheists. The founder of Reconstructionism, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, was falsely accused of atheism during his lifetime and has been so labeled since his death. Those accusations are made by people who think that either you believe in a God who governs the details of our lives, rewarding and punishing us, orchestrating the things that - happen or you don't believe in God at all.

Most Reconstructionists reject that attempt to define our beliefs, because it does not correspond with our experience. On good days, my life is permeated with God's presence. I open my eyes in the morning and am in awe of the light of the morning sun. Kissing my wife and children goodbye, I am overcome with the way our very imperfect family generates love and joy among us. Solving a difficult challenge on the job, I take a breath and notice the constructive, healing processes I have harnessed.

I don't believe that God decided to cause the sun to rise this morning. I don't believe God watches over my children and makes them mature. I don't believe God solves my work problems. But I do believe I live in a world that God underlies and suffuses. I do believe that I do not generate my virtuous deeds and insights independently, but rather am connected to a greater Source of strength and blessing with whom I am always trying to align. I believe some things are right and some things are wrong, and I believe that when you do the wrong thing you are opposing the divine will and that the world is so constructed that you will suffer for it internally.

Not all Reconstructionists share each of these specific beliefs. What we do share is a conviction that a) the words of the Torah, and consequently the *mitzvot* (including those about prayer) were not literally spoken and commanded by God at Sinai, *and* b) that nevertheless our inherited traditions, including the *siddur* (prayer book), are an invaluable treasure that can help us to unfold the deeper meanings of our lives and our relationship to God.

In other words, if I had brought a tape recorder to Mount Sinai, I believe there would have been no audible divine voice to record; only the human side of the conversation was recordable. But I believe that God *was* at Sinai, encountered by Moses, so that even though the words of the Torah are Moses human interpretation of God's will, they are inspired by that encounter and contain divine insight.

And so with every divine-human encounter up to the present day: What we hear and understand of God is necessarily conditioned by who we are, by where and when we live, by our culture's values, by our individual propensities. We are the flawed filters through which the word of God is conveyed. Therefore, we Reconstructionists don't believe that everything that preceding generations said about God and about what God wants is true. But we do believe in a God who is beyond all of the historically conditioned human portraits of God. And we seek to express our intuitions of God in ways that both correspond to the teachings we inherit and that are compelling in the cultural idiom of our day.

There are three primary ways that Jews have pictured God at work in our lives - as the God of Creation, the God of Revelation, and the God of Redemption. Each of these can still serve us well as we seek to give words to our encounters with God.

Creation

God is the Source of the universe. God is therefore met in the laws and cycles of nature, in the expanse of the galaxies, in the miracle of life. Even as scientists explore quarks and black holes, new facets of DNA and new evidence about evolution, we are aware that we will never comprehend it all. But when we catch the breeze on a sunny spring day or watch a toddler take her first step, we get a glimpse of the ineffable oneness underlying it all.

Revelation God is the Source of our spiritual and moral passion. The human species may or may not be the crown of creation, but there is definitely a connection between our minds and souls and the divinely infused world out there. It is as if God's word overflows perpetually, embedded in the color of the sky and the behavior of groups, in test tubes and mathematical formulas, waiting for us to open to its message and interpret it for our lives and time. The more open we are, the more we hear.

Redemption

God is the source of all our tendencies to help and love and cooperate. It is easy enough for each of us to remain self-centered, not to care about others, to regard others as Other and therefore not worthy of our kindness. Human history documents the prevalence of these tendencies. But there is a divine spark in each of us that can be nurtured, a source of goodness and caring that can move us to act on principle, to do what is right even if it is not in our own best interest in the short term. It enables us to envision a redeemed world so that we can work towards

that vision.

The kabbalists seized and expanded upon the rabbinic assertion that we are partners with God in the work of creation. They pictured this world as having been created imperfect by God, who then needs us to release the divine sparks hidden within it.
Here, then, is a non-exhaustive list of why a Reconstructionist Jew, who does not believe that God hears our prayers or answers our petitions, might choose to pray:

Spiritual Discipline

Most of us go through the day without experiencing God's presence. A spiritual sense is a faculty that must be developed and maintained. Focusing regularly on our sacred encounters helps us to notice them as they occur.

Meditation

Most of us live at a very rapid pace. We welcome the opportunity to slow down to remember what has deeper meaning beyond our daily distractions.

Group Connection

If we are not careful, it is pretty easy to become isolated. Even if we interact frequently with others, our daily lives rarely afford many opportunities to let our guards down and express what is really important to us. It is a real treat to be connected to a group, all of whom are seeking together.

Celebration

For many of us, group singing transports us beyond ourselves. I may be awash in gratitude for a life-cycle passage, or for the blossoming of flowers in my yard, but without my *minyan* (prayer quorum), where could I sing out?

Group Support

Life is unfortunately filled with disappointment, illness, tragedy. Social scientists now tell us what we already knew: that recovery from family discord, depression, and even physical illness is enhanced when we experience the support of a caring group. You therefore might believe that praying for a sick person is efficacious even if you don t believe that God intercedes supernaturally. Our prayers have power.

Rededication to Principles

Most of us are raised to think that we have control of our lives, and that therefore we are responsible for what happens to us good and bad. In truth, we have far less control than we think, and it is good to

acknowledge our vulnerability. Prayer allows us to ask for help, to admit that we need help, that we are frightened or overwhelmed or desperate. Removing our defenses before God can move us to the honest self-awareness we require to get past our personal obstacles.

The rabbis engaged in interesting discussions about the relationship in prayer between *kevah* (fixed prayers, the words of which are provided in the *siddur*) and *kavanah* (spontaneous reflections by the one praying). They understood that mindless recitation of words written by others was not prayer. But they also understood that without a prepared format to induce us to pray, most of us would rarely achieve a prayerful state.

The traditional prayers in the *siddur* are thus intended as a format to assist us in getting in touch with our own personal prayers. In my own experience, it was the regular recitation of the *Modim* (thanks) section of the *Amidah* (standing prayer) that first enabled me, after six months, to become regularly connected with my feelings of thankfulness. I then went on to other parts of the fixed service until the entire fixed service has become a set of mnemonics that jump-start me in an ever-new variety of meditations.

But isn't the traditional service, even in the new Reconstructionist *siddur*, laden with anthropomorphic supernatural language that presents a challenge to our intellectual integrity and thus an obstacle to genuine prayer? The answer for many people is yes - unless and until we reinterpret the meaning of images so often that we reach a point at which we read them with new meanings without need to reinterpret consciously any longer. Here are two illustrations:

Modim

In every *Amidah,* we *davven* the *Modim* paragraph, a prayer of thanksgiving in which we say:

> We acknowledge you, declare your praise, and thank you . . . for your miracles that greet us every day, and for your wonders and good things that are with us every hour.

Now, the words *nisseha* (your miracles) and *nifla'oteha* (your wonders) are terms that have traditionally been applied to God's splitting of the Sea of Reeds and God's enabling of the one flask of oil to burn for eight days in other words, to classical supernatural events in which we Reconstructionists do not literally believe.

Yet these traditional words can helpfully re-introduce a sense of awe, wonder, and thankfulness into our consciousness, a needed antidote to the modern tendency to reduce the wonders of nature and human

development to their scientific causes, ignore their sacred dimension and thus impoverish our spirits.

Do you nevertheless remain resistant to using the word miracle? Consider, then, the interpretation of Rabbi Levi ben Gerson (Gersonides), a 14th-century Jewish philosopher who was as uncomfortable as we are with the notion that God intervenes supernaturally to perform miracles. Gersonides understood miracles as extraordinary events that violated no laws of nature but were sufficiently rare that most people are surprised by them. He believed it is the function of prophets, who have a heightened understanding of nature, to anticipate and point out these extraordinary events, and to use them to remind the rest of us of God's presence in the world.

Here, then, is a "traditional understanding" (over 600 years old, and published in traditional Bible commentaries) of miracles as natural events that evoke awe and wonder. A sunrise. Childbirth. Love. Insight. An unexpected recovery from illness. An unanticipated peace treaty. An overwhelming obstacle overcome. Miracles.

The Morning Blessings

Every *Shaharit* morning service begins with *Birhot Hashahar*, the Morning Blessings, in which we praise God for such things as "making the blind to see," "clothing the naked," "making the captive free," etc. How can we honestly say that our non-supernatural God does these things? God doesn't cause blindness, and most blind people are never able to see. If the vision of a blind person is restored by surgery, thanking God for the work of the surgeon is a bit naive and saccharine.

In each of these cases, it is critically important to realize that our questions are not new in Jewish history. It is incorrect to imagine all of our ancestors as pious, simple peasants who thought they literally saw God's finger in every occurrence that impressed them. They knew that blind people don't see, that beggars in rags aren't provided with wardrobes, that captives often perish. And so we have a centuries-old treasury of interpretive traditions that give rich expression to the multiple meanings of these phrases.

There are many forms of blindness. We don't see because we fail to notice out of carelessness. Or because we are enraged. Or because we lack the insight that comes from maturity. Or because we are blinded by preconceptions or prejudice. Or because we had glaucoma or cataracts. Or because we lacked the right teachers and mentors. Or because cultural conceptions misled us. Seen in this way, all of life is a process of acquiring new and better sight, and God is the force within us and around us that helps us to grow in ever-new ways.

Each of these *berahot* (blessings) acknowledges an aspect of our experience in which it is possible to become frustrated, to lose hope, to get caught in a rut. The morning blessings are an invaluable tool to help us begin the new day by opening to new possibilities.

Praying allows us to center our focus, to look inward, to be elevated beyond our individual concerns, and the words and structures of the traditional service can be very helpful in all these regards. The answer to our prayers comes not from a supernatural God but from our own transformed hearts.

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Reinventing Synagogues and Prayer

By Sid Schwarz

With all the talk about God and spirituality in the Jewish community, the real truth is that most Jews can't pray. Nor does the contemporary American synagogue offer much help in this regard.

It's not that we don't try. Those Jews who are raised with some kind of Jewish education learn a handful of prayers by rote. It tends to be a version of "The Siddur's Greatest Hits." If one attends synagogue services fairly regularly, it is not too hard to broaden your repertoire past the

Shema, Ashrei and *Adon Olam*. Of course, most Jews don't attend services very regularly. When they do come, usually as an invited guest for some sort of *simha*, they sit passively for two-plus hours, perhaps joining in on the one or two prayers that they learned as a child — provided that the cantor hasn't changed the tune.

If we took an exit poll of Jews leaving services and asked the question, "Have you had a meaningful prayer experience," few would answer in the affirmative.

Synagogues do many things well. They provide places for Jews to gather, bond, educate themselves and their children, mobilize on behalf of important causes, transmit Jewish heritage. Some do connect with the liturgy. In the old joke about synagogue services, Levine admits that Goldberg attends synagogue to talk to God but he goes to talk to Goldberg. The problem is that we have a lot more Levines in our community than Goldbergs.

I encounter more and more Jews today who are engaged on a spiritual search. They read books about Jewish mysticism, spirituality and God. They experiment with alternative religious disciplines, from meditation to yoga to a variety of eastern religious ashrams or fellowship houses. Depending on what type of rabbi you ask, such explorations are characterized anywhere from "a useful experience to enhance one's spirituality" to "a dangerous threat to one's Jewish identity." Many rabbis don't know what to make of the phenomenon.

Some of these Jewish seekers find their way to a local synagogue. Most leave, convinced that the religion of their childhood is incapable of meeting their longing for spirituality. Essentially, the problem is a gap between *keva* and *kavanah*. *Keva* represents the inherited liturgical tradition. Each of the movements in American Jewish life have adapted the *keva* to a certain extent, and those adaptations are generally represented in the official prayer books they publish. Each synagogue works to make their particular *keva* as familiar and as comfortable to their congregants as possible. While the *keva* of a Reform temple is significantly different from the *keva* of an Orthodox synagogue, each carries the same level of sanctity to the constituency of its respective institution.

It is here that Reconstructionist congregations have a unique contribution to make to American Jewish life. Our communities represent precious portals into Judaism for the contemporary Jewish seeker. First, Reconstructionism has a long tradition of demystifying and decoding words that often confuse and turn off many Jews. Words like *God, prayer, faith, tradition, belief*, and *ritual* are pregnant with meaning, and stir up a lot of negative baggage in Jews. Reconstructionist rabbis are trained not to take such words for granted. Each requires careful unpacking and repackaging in order for Jews to give the tradition a second chance.

Second, the very premise of Reconstructionist Judaism puts the Jewish people prior to the Jewish tradition. What this means is that we recognize that our religion, as an outgrowth of the historical experience of the Jewish people, changes with time. While Judaism cannot and should not merely be whatever a group of Jews make of it at a given time, changing conceptions of God, community, morality and justice cannot but have a dramatic impact on the Judaism we have inherited from our ancestors. From this tension — between the wisdom and power of continuity of the tradition, and the search of contemporary Jews for sacred expressions of their highest aspirations and deepest longings — can emerge the vibrant and spiritual practice of Judaism.

Today's spiritual seekers come with little knowledge of any *keva*, but with a soul full of *kavanah*. In traditional Hebrew usage, *kavanah* is defined as the deep intention of the prayer. To the contemporary seeker, *kavanah* is their own intention to connect with something that they may call spirituality, meaning, or transcendence. Conventional idiom calls this God.

The problem is that when the *kavanah* of the seeker meets up with the *keva* of the synagogue, the spiritual spark is more likely suffocated than nurtured. Even if the rabbi of a given synagogue is effective in creating a level of *kavanah* within the *keva* of their own worship service for their regular worshipers, this language is mostly closed to the uninitiated.

Unless rabbis and synagogues find ways to address the needs of this category of seeker, we will fail to attract some of the most sensitive and thoughtful Jewish souls around today. This is not an easy task. There are tens of thousands of Jews who have been searching for a more compelling mode of Jewish life and practice and who have gained glimpses of what that could look like at selected retreats, conventions, institutes and workshops. They want to find places where they can bring their particular *kavanah*, reflecting their own life experience, and have that connect to the words of our tradition. Most don't have the learning to do that. And most rabbis don't even have these Jews on their radar screens. This is a generation that is ready to

dance in the aisles in joyful worship; most synagogues are still offering us responsive readings!

What Jewish life needs today is a spiritual feasibility study in which the constituency is not only the Jews who are affiliated with a synagogue. We must cast a wider net: invite into focus groups all who care about the creative survival of the Jewish people and of Jewish religious practice; invite those who aren't even sure they care; make sure rabbis and synagogue presidents are in attendance.

Ask these focus groups about their spiritual needs. You will hear about a desire for connectedness, belonging, purpose and meaning. It is not a bad starting point for what should be happening in synagogues and during a religious service. Judaism provides a magnificent framework for these longings. Unfortunately, most synagogues believe that when Jews are ready for "the real thing" (as each particular synagogue practices it), they will come and join their synagogues. Some do, but they do so grudgingly and without passion. Increasing numbers simply opt out. With a little imagination and courage, synagogues could begin to build a bridge between the *kavanah* in the hearts of Jews currently outside the synagogue orbit and the *keva* that would attract such Jews into their congregations.

Bridging the gap between *keva* and *kavanah* means creating a new set of objectives for what we call "religious services." The spiritual seekers in our midst are looking for an experience of joy, a sense of awe, a moment of quiet contemplation, a flash of intellectual insight, a feeling of communal support, a hand of friendship, a connection to history. The siddur provides gateways to every one of these experiences, but the liturgy must be decoded to make these intentions understandable to the seekers among us. Are our seminaries, and rabbinical organizations asking these kinds of questions and equipping rabbis with these skills today? We must see to it that they do. If Jewish continuity simply means continuing what exists, I am not sure there are enough takers to make the enterprise worthwhile. On the other hand, if we hold out a more ambitious goal for Jewish continuity — the ability to attract a large category of Jews whose needs currently go unmet in the organized Jewish community, then the Jewish future might look a lot more exciting than anyone today has fair reason to expect.

RECONSTRUCTIONISM TODAY
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Political Activism as a Form of Prayer

By Christie Balka

In the Fall of 1984, when the international movement to end apartheid in South Africa was in full swing, I happened to be in Washington, D.C. for a day. Knowing that opponents of apartheid were holding vigils in front of the South African Embassy every evening during rush hour, I stopped there before heading home to Philadelphia. In front of a large building set back from the street, I joined some hundred strangers who were marching back and forth in a loop, chanting to the sound of a drumbeat as cars honked and night fell. There on a narrow strip of sidewalk, I simultaneously lost myself and gained the strength to challenge one of the most brutal and oppressive regimes of the day.

The profound connection that I experienced with the divine that evening changed the way I've understood religion ever since. Rather than seeing religion and political activism as two distinct phenomena, I view activism as a powerful form of prayer. Speeding away from Washington on the train that night, I thought: "So this is what Abraham Joshua Heschel meant when he said of his participation in the 1965 Voting Rights March, 'I felt as though my legs were praying.'" Thirty-five years later, we remember Heschel as an outstanding Jewish participant in an iconic pilgrimage to Selma, Alabama — a recollection that obscures the extent to which he acted as part of a mass movement and, in the process, placed himself and his family at risk. In fact, that was not the first time Heschel took a political risk, nor would it be the last. Between 1943 and his death in 1972, he opposed Hitler's fascism, America's racism, and the Vietnam War. Arthur Waskow writes that for Heschel, "commitments to the spiritual and the political ... were simply one commitment."

In what ways might Reconstructionist Jews see prayer and activism as one?

- Like prayer, activism is a shared experience that relies on language, art, and other folk traditions. Attending meetings, reproducing leaflets, stuffing envelopes, canvassing a neighborhood, making signs and banners, arriving at demonstrations and greeting acquaintances

— all of these are rituals that prepare participants for the big event of taking collective action to confront power wielded unjustly by one group over another. The "big event" is often a vigil, rally, demonstration, "zap action," or other form of direct action. These rituals of challenge to injustice require an escalating level of commitment and risk from participants — whether it's the risk of publicly expressing unpopular views, signing a petition, canvassing door to door, attending a vigil, or being arrested for civil disobedience.

- Repetition often deepens the experience, strengthening participants' focus and collective resolve. In each case, activism connects us to something larger than ourselves, whether it's other members of our community (our next- door neighbor, the homeless woman across town, the child maimed in a war halfway across the world) or the values that motivate us (tzedek, justice, shalom, peace).

- Activism requires us to make a profound statement of faith. It reflects both our highest ideals and our belief that transformation is, in fact, possible. By acting on this belief, we make it more so.

- Participation in activist movements connects us to the long sweep of history, to Jews who have struggled for peace and justice from the Exodus through the late 20th century. Recently, when Jews in my community urged the GAP clothing chain to adopt fair labor practices for sweatshop workers around the world, they distributed leaflets citing their Biblical and historical ancestors. Standing in front of a GAP store with their children, they showed how political movements are an important locus of cultural transmission. (I suspect more than a few RT readers participated in their first political action with their parents, and have, in turn, done the same with their children.)

- Participation in social movements also puts us in touch with the vastness of the universe. Through the sort of "click" moment I had in front of the South African Embassy, or through small actions undertaken on a daily basis, activism requires us to submerge our egos while acknowledging that massive human effort is required to bring about the changes we seek.

While traditional Jews understand divine authority as infallible and endeavor to submit to it, Reconstructionism embodies a more democratic ethos. Here again, Reconstructionists and political activists share something in common: a critique of traditional power relationships and a commitment to challenging these, whether perceived as originating in the divine or embedded in the policies of corporations and the state.

In fact, Reconstructionists and political activists share much in common: an appreciation of ritual, beliefs in the importance of community, a commitment to ultimate values and to democracy, and a sense of connection to the past and the future. What, then, keeps us from integrating prayer and activism

more fully?

One quality that distinguishes political activism from other forms of prayer is the degree of risk involved. Although it's no longer dangerous for Jews in North America or Israel to engage in conventional forms of prayer, it's risky to act on unpopular political beliefs. Doing so may heighten real or perceived dangers to us as individuals and as a community. It's one thing to maintain that the U.S. shouldn't harm innocents in Afghanistan, and quite another to act publicly on this belief. It's one thing to lament the growing gap between rich and poor, and another to protest the exorbitantly high salaries of corporate CEOs. In both cases, activism raises the specter of disloyalty, of being perceived as not-quite-American enough, which reinforces old anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Most importantly, I suspect that the failure to integrate prayer and activism stems from our understanding of prayer more as a source of comfort than of mobilization within our congregations. Yet the greatest risk, it seems to me, is to accept the status quo while treating prayer as a pacifier. As American Jews, after all, we are standing on the precipice. Violence in the Middle East has spiraled out of control. The U.S. is engaged in an ill-defined war on terrorism that provides cover for a massive transfer of resources from domestic programs to the military and the revival of Cold War nuclear doctrines. Recent and likely Presidential appointments threaten reproductive rights, racial and economic justice, and the separation of church and state. At such a time, we should consider Heschel's teaching that "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods."

Even more, we should consider his actions, in Selma and elsewhere, as a model for the integration of prayer and activism within our congregations.

Study Texts on Prayer Across Jewish Civilization
(texts adapted from "The God File: Ten Approaches to Personalizing Prayer" by Rabbi Areyh Ben David)

Approach – The Judge

Samson Raphael Hirsch

***Horev*, 616-623**

. . . There are two Divine services: the inner Divine service (prayer) and the outer, active, Divine service (in the whirl of life). The inner Divine service should serve as a preparation of the outer one and should realize, in it, its main purpose.

This fulfillment of the Divine will in our inner self can come to its perfection only by bringing about a change in our thoughts and emotions - namely, by evoking and rejecting, and by bringing to life and reviving thoughts and emotions in our inner self.

"*Hitpallel"*, from which "*tefillah*" is derived, originally meant to deliver an opinion about oneself, to judge oneself . . . Thus it denotes a step out of active life in order to attempt to gain a true judgment about oneself, that is, about one's ego, about one's relationship to God and the world and of God and the world to oneself. It strives to infuse mind and heart with the power of such judgment as will direct both anew to active life - purified, sublimated, strengthened. The procedure of arousing such self-judgment is called '*tefillah*." In English we call *tefilla* 'prayer,' but this word only incompletely expresses the concept, for 'to pray,' *i.e*., to ask for something, is only a minor section of *tefilla*.

In life itself, you do not gather strength for living, nor in the practice of truth, righteousness and love do you absorb the recognition of and the feeling for truth and righteousness and love. You cannot equip yourself to fight against inner and outer dangers, against troubles and passions, when you are engulfed in the very midst of the battle. Life often robs you of the power and strength its circumstances make necessary, for it tends to remove from you truth and offers falsehood; it forces you to surrender where your task is to conquer. Life even silences the voice of the eternal truths which should for the basis of and sanctity of your life. You only half-hear their voice; you practice them thoughtlessly, so that they do not become your educators toward God. Accordingly, you should at times tear yourself loose fro this existence which endangers your true life, and strive in *tefilla* to renew your strength for life and regain your right and your will for truth, righteousness and love, as well as the power and the courage for victorious battle.

In the struggle of life, you may run into the danger of thinking only of the future. The past may withdraw from your view, and you look only upon that which is yet to be attained, no longer thinking of that which has already been acquired . . . You may look only upon the deed which is still to be done, no longer turning your glance upon the deed already done, as though you did not have to build your future upon your past.

In *tefilah*, you should step out from the striving after the future and view your past and that which has come to you in life, recognizing that it came to you, and is yours, only through God. You should realize that what you have become is due to all these gifts resulting from the love of God. You must reflect where your

life has fallen short and unworthy of this love. You should confess the fault, admitting the sin to yourself, the first step towards *t'shuvah* [repentance]. You should recognize your past and learn to confess your error in prayer . . . .

The fruit of this inner Divine service should be the Divine service of the deed. In *tefillah*, you gather the strength of dedication for life, allowing this life to become the fulfillment of the Divine will . . . Thus the flower of all *tefillah* is the resolution which infuses the whole man and unites all your powers to be a servant of God in life.

Approach – The Listener

Rav Kook

Introduction to *Olat Ra'aya*, Commentary on the Prayerbook

1) The perpetual prayer of the soul continually tries to emerge from its latent state to become revealed and actualized, to permeate every fiber of life of the entire universe. She (the prayer of the soul) yearns to reveal her essence and her power on all that surrounds her, on all of life and the world, and therefore we need to understand the world, that comes through the learning of Torah and wisdom. From all this we learn that all of one's efforts to learn Torah and acquire wisdom is in order to provide the continual revealing of the concealed prayer of the soul. "The soul of all life blesses God's name."

2) Prayer does not come as a remedy, rather as the expression of the understanding that the soul is continually praying. She (the prayer of the soul) flies and embraces her lover without any break or separation. At the moment of actual prayer the perpetual soulful prayer is revealed in deed. This is her pleasure, her joy, her glory and crown, of the soulful prayer. She then resembles a rose that opens her gentle petals toward the dew or in the presence of the rays of the sun that shine upon her. "If only one would pray the entire day long."

3) Prayer beseeches the soul to convey to her its role. When many days or years have passed without serious prayer, toxic stones gather around one's heart, and one feels, because of them, a certain heaviness of spirit. When one's 'good' spirit returns, and the gift of prayer is bequeathed from the heavens, the obstacles are gradually removed, the many dams that have blocked the free-flowing of the stream of one's soul gradually disappear . . . This will not occur in one moment, but gradually the splendor of prayer reveals its light.

4) Before praying, a person needs to feel both the indispensability of prayer and the pleasure of prayer. Prayer does not desire to change anything of God, who is the source of all things eternal and does not change. Rather, the goal of prayer is, through all of the changes that occur to one's soul and consequently to all the parts of the world that are connected to one's soul, to lift oneself closer to the completely spiritual . . . One speaks to God as if to a king that is liable to change his verdict, as if to a parent that is open to change. When a person desires to elevate himself closer to God, then [before even praying] he has already become elevated through the change in his will, and this [change of] will affects the whole cosmos of being.

Approach – The Talker

Rebbe Nachman from Bratzslav

***Likutei Maharan*, #25, 52**

itbod'dut (being alone) is the highest and most exalted experience. That is to say, one should fix for himself at least one hour or more daily to do *hitbod'dut* - in a room or in a field. To pour out one's thoughts between oneself and God - in complaints or frustrations, in words of kindness or agreement - and to request and beseech God that he will be able to approach closer to God in his true behavior and desires. And this outpouring should be done in one's native language [that is to say - Yiddish] . . . because one's heart is

drawn after one's words, and it is easier to pull one's heart through the language that one is most comfortable in.

And everything that is in one's heart one should discuss and say to God. Both one's regrets and any changes one has made concerning the past, as well as desires and yearnings for the future, especially to come closer to God. One should be very careful to habituate oneself always in this, everyday, for one hour, and then the rest of the day one will be contented and cheerful.

A person should do this alone, at night, in a special place, where no other people are likely to come. Outside of the city, in a place where no one goes even during the day. One should remove his mind and heart from this world and pour out his heart to God, until there is nothing left. And then one should nullify even the nothingness.

This mode of behavior is a very, very sublime practice, and it is the recommended way to come closer to God, because it includes all other ways. Because anything that may be lacking in one's relationship with God, or if one is at all feeling alienated from God - about all of this one should talk with God. And even if sometimes the words do not flow, and he is not able to even open his mouth, nevertheless, it is quite worthwhile. Because the preparation that he is doing, that he is willing to stand in front of God, and that he desires and yearns to talk, even though he is not able to, this in and of itself is very commendable. And on this alone one should scream and plead with God, Who seems so far away, until one has no words left to say. And one should plead with God to grant him mercy and kindness, and that God should graciously open his (the individual's) mouth that one will become able to talk and pour out one's life in front of God.

And you should know, that a countless number of renowned *Tzaddikim* (holy and righteous people) have said that they only reached their level because they were scrupulous in this practice. And every intelligent person should understand by himself the elevated nature of this behavior that ascends more and more. Furthermore, this practice may be done by any individual, young or old, everyone is capable of performing this action, and everyone is capable of arriving at a very high level. Happy is the one who holds tightly to it.

***Hilchot Shiluach HaKen*, halacha #5**

It is possible to come closer (to God) through being far away, but this is possible only through holy speech, and through *tefila*. A person should think very deeply about his being estranged from God, and nevertheless know that God is close to everyone, even to those who through their evil actions are very far removed from God. And this is only possible (to come closer) through speaking, because only through speaking can one call to one who is very far away, and then will come closer to him because of his calling. As it is written, "God is close to all those that call to Him, to all that call to him in truth."

***Hilchot Birchot HaR'iyah*, #14**

Speech has a very very great power to transform a man from bad to good, because the essence of life's battle is through speech, which is the most important weapon of the Jewish people. As the rabbis said, there is no power in us save through our mouth . . . All the power of the messiah is through his *tefila*, which is through speech. Through speech comes the defeat of evil, from which all forgetfulness comes. The vanquishing of forgetfulness and the meriting of memory is through speech. We witness this through the repeating of learning many times out loud, which brings about we remember our learning.

***Hilchot Kriat HaTorah*, Halacha 6**

A person should always banish from his mind everyday and at all time everything that has happened to him until that very moment that he begins to pray. He should not consider his past at all, as if he had never begun anything at all. Because if he begins to think about all of his failures and breakdowns, which happen to everyone, he will end up dwelling on all the times that he tried (to come close to God) and then despaired, and then again tried to strengthen himself and failed again. Through these memories he will

inevitably bring himself to total despair, and say to himself that he has no hope to succeed in his prayers . . . Rather he must scream to God from the depths of his heart just what he needs at that moment.

Approach – The Servant

Yeshayahu Leibowitz

***Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, p. 30, 1960**

"A prayer of the afflicted when he faints, and pours out his complaint before the Lord" (Psalms 102:1); and in contrast, "Let a man rouse himself like a lion to get up in the morning for the service of his Creator" (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, 1:1); the first is the title of one of the Psalms and the second, the very beginning of the Shulchan Aruch, which serves as an introduction to the laws of prayer - these two symbolize and express two meanings of prayer, which not only differ from one another, but contradict one another.

The first is a human psychological phenomenon - an expression of an impulse from within, an action whose source is in man himself or in factors in a person's life, in the conditions and circumstances in which he exists; and activity which a person does for himself, for the satisfaction of his needs - and there is no difference in this matter between material, intellectual, or psychological needs. This is prayer for man's benefit - a service which he performs for himself, a worship in which he worships himself, and it possesses nothing of service of the Creator, which accepts the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven. In other words: this prayer is not in its essence a religious phenomenon at all, even though it is, as are many other psychological manifestations found in religion, as a natural and legitimate result of human manipulation of the religious category.

The greatness and power of prayer, the legally mandated-fixed and obligatory prayer, is in the rejection by man of all personal interests and motives which demand expression in differing forms and ways, in favor of the awareness of standing before God, a posture which is identical to all people in all conditions and in all circumstances, and is not dependent of one's personal history or what has occurred to him; i.e., the extinction of a person's will in favor of the obligation to serve God.

Approach – The Sufferer

Rav J. B. Soloveitchek

"Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah"

Redemption . . . is identical with communing, or with the revelation of the word, i.e. the emergence of speech. When a people leaves a mute world and enters a world of sound, speech and song, it becomes a redeemed people, a free people. In other words, a mute life is identical with bondage; a speech-endowed life is a free life.

Suffering is not pain. Though colloquially the two words are used as synonyms, they signify two different experiences. Pain is a natural sensation, a physiological reaction of the organism to any kind of abnormality or tissue pathology . . . Pain, as instinctual reaction, is immediate and non-reflective. As such, it is not restricted to humans: the beast is also exposed to and acquainted with pain.

Suffering or distress, in contradistinction to pain, is not a sensation but an experience, a spiritual reality known only to humans. This spiritual reality is encountered by man whenever he stands to lose either his sense of existential security (as in the case of an incurable disease) or his existential dignity (as in the case of public humiliation). Whenever a merciless reality clashes with the human existential awareness, man *suffers* and finds himself in distress.

Judaism wants man to cry out aloud against any kind of pain, to react indignantly to all kinds of injustice or unfairness . . . Whoever permits his legitimate needs to go unsatisfied will never be sympathetic to the crying needs of others. "I suffer, therefore, I am."

Therefore, prayer in Judaism, unlike the prayer of classical mysticism, is bound up with the human needs, wants, drives and urges, which make man suffer. Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should, or should not, petition God about. Of the 19 benedictions in our *Amida*, 13 are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national . . . Who prays? Only the sufferer prays . . . To a happy man, to contented man, the secret of prayer was not revealed. God needs neither thanks nor hymns. He wants to hear the outcry of man, confronted with a ruthless reality . . . In short, through prayer man finds himself. Prayer enlightens man about his needs. It tells man the story of his hidden hopes and expectations.

In a word, man finds his need-awareness, himself, in prayer. Of course, the very instant he finds himself, he becomes a redeemed being.

Approach – The Artist

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Man's Quest for God

The drive toward practical consequences is not the force that inspires a person at the moment of his chanting praise to God. Even in supplication, the thought of aid or protection does not constitute the inner act of prayer. The hope of results may be the motive that leads the mind into prayer, but not the content which fills the worshiper's consciousness in the essential moment of prayer. The artist may give a concert for the sake of the promised remuneration, but, in the moment when he is passionately seeking with his fingertips the vast swarm of swift and secret sounds, the consideration of subsequent reward is far from his mind. His whole being is immersed in the music. The slightest shift of attention, the emergence of any ulterior motive, would break his intense concentration and his single-minded devotion would collapse, his control of the instrument would fail. Even an artisan can never be true to his task unless he is motivated by love of the work for its own sake. Only by wholehearted devotion to his trade, can he produce a consummate piece of craftsmanship. Prayer, too, is primarily *kavanah* (thoughtful intention), the yielding of the entire being to one goal, the gathering of the soul into focus.

The focus of prayer is not the self. A man may spend hours meditating about himself, or be stirred by the deepest sympathy for his fellow man, and no prayer will come to pass. Prayer comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. Feeling becomes prayer in the moment in which we forget ourselves and become aware of God. When we analyze the consciousness of a supplicant, we discover that it is not concentrated upon his own interests, but on something beyond the self. The thought of personal need is absent, and the thought of divine grace alone is present in his mind. Thus, in beseeching Him for bread, there is one instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger nor to food, but to His mercy. This instant is prayer.

We start with a personal concern and live to feel the utmost. For the fate of the individual is a counterpoint in a larger theme. In prayer we come close to hearing the eternal theme and discerning our place in it. It is as if our life were a seamless garment, continuous with the Infinite. Our poverty is His. His property is ours. Overwhelmed with awe of His share in our lives, we extend ourselves to Him, expose our goals to His goodness, exchange our will for His wisdom. For this reason, the analogy between prayer and petitioning another human being is like the analogy between the ocean and a cup of water. For the essence of prayer lies in man's self-transcending, in his surpassing the limits of what is human, in his relating the purely natural to the Divine.

Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives, to let His will prevail in our affairs; it is the opening of a window to Him in our will, an effort to make Him the Lord of our soul.

***The Prophets*, 440-1**

Prayer is an act consisting of a moment of decision or turning, and of a moment of direction. For to be engaged in prayer and to be away from prayer are two different states of living and thinking. In the depth of the soul there is a distance between the two. The course of consciousness which a person pursues, the way of thinking by which he lives most of the time, are remote from the course and way of thinking peculiar to prayer. To be able to pray, one must alter the course of consciousness, one must go through moments of disengagement, one must enter another course of thinking, one must face in a different direction.

In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. God is the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source, and we are the flowing of His force, the ebb and flow of His tides.

Approach – The Mystic

Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira

***A Student's Obligation*, p. 191-2**

. . . And even though the *Zohar* explains the various parts of prayer according to their esoteric meaning, and according to the fixing they accomplish in the spiritual worlds, it seems that the songs and praises contained in the morning psalms and in the blessings of the *Shema* and the *Shmoneh Esreh* are the means through which all these effects are attained. Even the middle blessings of the *Shmoneh Esreh* according to the *Zohar* which contain man's prayers for the fulfillment of his needs, are effective only because of all the fixing and the mystical unifications accomplished by the songs and praises that preceded these requests. The songs create a "time of favor" on high, a propitious moment for the fulfillment of requests.

Therefore, do not let your heart fall within you, in the erroneous belief that since you have no knowledge of the secret meanings and intentions of the prayers, which cause fixing and repair in the higher realms, your prayers are ineffectual . . . [don't say to yourself] "What use is there in trying to pray with great effort since I don't know how to pray with the kabbalistic intentions anyway?" However, the following example should help you understand why this kind of thinking is mistaken. The artisan who fashions the inner workings of a watch knows all the details of its machinery. He is the biggest expert on watches and can fix a watch if it has been broken. Yet anyone is capable of winding the watch. You don't have to know why winding the watch makes it start ticking to make it work; the watchmaker has already set it all up so that all you have to do is wind it. And if you don't wind it, all the watchmaker's labors won't do a bit of good; the clock simply won't run. So it is with prayer. The truth is that a person who knows how to concentrate with all the proper kabbalistic intentions and unifications can accomplish more with his prayer. But all of his fixings and unifications depend on the arousal of Jewish souls, who cause the divine to become manifest through their songs. Moreover, the sages have already arranged the prayers in a certain order that functions like the key of the watchmaker, the key that unlocks all the intentions and unifications. A Jew who prays with all his heart and soul opens the gates on high and fixes what needs repair, since it is through his body and all the parts of his soul that the revelation of the divine in the upper worlds, and even the whole concept of left and right in the upper worlds becomes manifest. Even a person who knows all the proper intentions cannot affect anything with his prayers, God forbid, if he does not awaken his soul and pray passionately.

Approach – The Religious Humanist

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan

As the power that makes for world order and personal salvation, God is not a person but a Process. Nevertheless, our experience of that Process is entirely personal…Critics of the conception of God as Process object to it on the ground that it reduces prayer to a form of talking to oneself. In a sense that is true, but we must understand in *what* sense it is true. All thinking- and prayer is a form of thought- is

essentially a dialogue between our purely individual egocentric self and our self as representing a process that goes on beyond us…When we establish contact with the Process that makes for human salvation, we can do so only through an appeal to a higher self that represents the working of the Process within us. From that higher self, which is identical with our conscience, the moral censor of our acts, and which represents God as operative in our life, we seek the answer to prayer.

Questions Jews Ask (Recon Press, 1856, p. 105-6)

When we worship in public we know our life is part of a larger life, a wave of an ocean of being- the first-hand experience of that larger life which is God.

Kol Haneshamah Shabbat Vehagim, p. 57

Approach – The Neo-Hasid, Women and Voices Today

Davennen is living the liturgical life in the presence of God. It is transformative of the indivudal, the group, and the situation. It takes us through changes, past our tentative following…

The Jewish service is intended to attune us to the four levels of divine manifestation. It deals with the person as a quadrinity: body, emotions, intellect, and spiritual-divine essence.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Paradigm Shift*, p. 162, 192

"For with you is the source of all life….
Extend your justice to those honest in their hearts" (Ps. 36)

Liturgy in preparation for putting on the tallit (prayer shawl) in morning services

"For the sake of the union of the blessed Holy One with the Shechinah, I stand here, ready in body and mind, to take upon myself the mitzvah, "You shall love your fellow human being as yourself (Lev. 19)," and by this merit may I open my mouth."

(kavannah introduced by the Kabbalists of Sfat, to be said before formal prayer)

What of prayer and social justice?
Is this not the beginning and end of prayer?
To love each other and the planet
Of which we are a part
To inspire and ignite within us
The very sense of communal responsibility
That our prayers become activist stances-
Connecting us to our own hearts and values,
To those in our immediate communities
And ultimately as all worship ends in Aleynu-
It is upon us "li'takeyn olam b'malchut Shaddai"
To repair the world for
Godliness to permeate everywhere.

Love is an action, not only a feeling-
And we pray for justice to enter our hearts
The Jewish path in prayer and justice
Is both reflexive and externally active.
Our word for prayer is "tefillah"
From the ancient Hebrew "palal"-
To judge or discern.
The prefix directs us to meet the internal "judge"
And pour our hearts and action outwards
From the place of greater clarity and equanimity.
Are not judges those we look to

For the dispensation and discernment of justice?

Holy One of Blessing
Your invitation is to locate our acts of tikkun olam
In honesty, in equity, in love for ourselves,
Loving each other and the world,
in justice.

Without prayer we may start to believe
We alone are the source and judge
Of what is a right course of action
Without taking our prayers
Out of the sanctuary into the streets
We risk seeking comfort and escape
From the cries around us.

All of the natural world
Has its own song to the universe
When we lovingly open our hearts
When we strive for justice within
And outside the walls of our communities
Then our prayer can become
A grounding source for the ideas of justice
And a grounding force for the actions of justice.

Jewish Values and the Prayer Life of Community-Assessment Process

Developed by Rabbi Shawn Zevit

What are the widely shared key Jewish values, and policies regarding worship and religious practice that inform when, where, why and how prayer takes place in your community?

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What are the three to five current key aspects of your community's prayer life that are having positive impact and working well (how do you measure this?)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

In your estimation, how has the community arrived at the current level of positive prayer culture and practice in the last few years with regard to each of these aspects?

What are three key areas in which the community will have to excel or change in order to succeed in the future with regard to the following?

a. Shabbat services

b. Yamim Noraim services?

c. Weekday, shivah minyanim or other services?

d. Prayer in educational settings, board meetings, tikkun programs, etc. (i.e. programs across the communal system?

Helpful Davvenen Leadership Hints
(From the Davennen Leaders Collective)
http://www.davvenenleadership.com/

- The prayers in the siddur are exalted spiritual poetry written over hundreds of centuries, from the earliest layers, like selections from Torah or Psalms, to later layers that are rabbinic and medieval, to the most contemporary**. The prayers themselves have intrinsic meaning and power which is "released" when they are chanted.**

- **AND sometimes we want as leaders to call attention to some aspect of the meaning of a prayer**, or offer instructions about how we as a group will be using that prayer, and the **challenge is to do that in away that stays inside the envelope of prayer that the davenen has generated, and not "break the spell" by inserting informational commentary that is not crafted in a way that holds the prayerful energy.** This is a skill that takes time and experience to cultivate… how to teach or insert the spoken word without pulling up the "parking break" on a train that is already moving.

- **AND there is the question of where** to provide commentary on prayers, and where one should not do this. Once the hatimah (closing blessing) of certain prayers has been said, the connection between that prayer and the prayer that follows is sometimes expected to be seamless…on "auto-pilot" and interruption to provide even interesting commentary breaks the flow. There are a lot of rabbinic traditions about when it is ok to speak and when not. But a few of the most common are:

    - **Between the end of the AHAVAH bracha and SHEMA**, one usually does not interrupt. So if you want to teach about Shema, where can you do that? Perhaps comment before "Va-havi-eynu l'shalom…." So that after your teaching we can pick up our tzitzit and go down the runway together to Shema Yisrael. Now our siddur does offer a few intro to Shema chants such as Echad Yachid, u-M'uchad or El Melech Ne'eman which can be inserted but not 'taught" with instructions. So if you do them, you have to figure out a way to lead/teach them without talking about them. No comments like: "Now we are going to do a special chant that introduces the Shema… etc. "You have to dive in and do it in a way that people pick it up from inside it not from outside it.

    - **Before the Amidah** is the same deal. Comment before Tzur Yisrael. Once Tzur Yisrael is begun, the plane is going down the runway… flow directly into Amidah.

    - Other places in the service where flow must be exercised? Let's work on this in the meeting…

- A skill to work on: Knowing places in the service where a leader or co-leaders can stop, breathe, take a moment of inner quiet to regroup…. and knowing when that would feel like the leader is suddenly "checking out" which can be disconcerting, leaving the congregation hanging, not knowing what is happening…. Using a baseball metaphor, center yourself on base and not while running to base.

- Find the best balance between prayers and explanations to develop flow within the service. Use language that is helpful and in amounts that are helpful to stimulating prayer. Limit anecdotal information and personal commentary.

- When leading a meditative or chanting service invite the kahal at the beginning of the service to follow the chant with silence. The leader too must model this. How? By closing eyes, sitting in a meditative pose, hands raised palms up on lap… If the leader is turning pages of the siddur or leaning over to touch base with the co-leader, this informs the kahal that it is NOT a deep meditative moment, but that the leader is just uncertain, or planning what is coming next while we sit and watch.

- The leader must signal to the congregation that the silence is deep and purposeful and not to be mistaken for the leadership's dropping the pillow. Consider re-clarifying intension once or twice during the service as people enter the davvenen space after the start of the service.

- When a prayer has a hatimah, a closing bracha, even if the leader does not chant the entire prayer, it is important to transition to the next prayer using the hatimah of the one that is ending… otherwise it is like talking on your land line and cell phone at the same time. Two conversations are open. It is important to end one before beginning the next. A hatimah closes a piece of our sacred-conversation so that we are prepared to begin a new one.

Sample Websites for Worship Guidelines and Decision-Making Resources

- The Reconstructionist Journal http://www.therra.org/recon_journal.htm ; Issues on Liturgy Fall, Volume 71, Number 1; Decision-Making Spring, Volume 65, Number 2; New Ritual Fall, Volume 63, Number 1; Sacred Space, Fall, Volume 69, Number 1.

- Reconstructionism Today- Dan Cedarbaum and respondents http://jrf.org/files/rt-14-2-winter-07.pdf and http://jrf.org/files/RT%2015.1.pdf

- Reconstructionism Today- Prayer: Who? How? Why? http://jrf.org/showrt&rid=657 and http://jrf.org/showrt&rid=660

- Connecting Prayer and Spirituality, Reconstructionist Press:

http://stores.jrfbookstore.org/-strse-48/jeffrey-shein/Detail.bok

- Kol Haneshamah Prayerbook Series, Reconstructionist Press:

http://stores.jrfbookstore.org/-strse-25/siddur/Detail.bok

The Reconstructionist Prayerbooks, featuring gender-neutral English text, contain new Hebrew and English liturgy as well as transliteration of all communally spoken prayers. Accessible to those finding their way into Judaism and inspiring for those who are familiar with the liturgy, the Kol Haneshamah series has been commended for its sparkling translation and extensive notes and commentary section.

- **Kol Haneshamah Music CD's** http://stores.jrfbookstore.org/-strse-Reconstructionist-Press-cln-Music/Categories.bok

-Eric Caplan, "From Ideology to Liturgy" Reconstructionist worship and American liberal Judaism http://huc.edu/newspubs/press/

- "**Reflections on Reconstructionist Prayer, Rabbi Bob Gluck,**

http://www.albany.edu/~gluckr/gluck.liturgyreflections.pdf

- **Shabbat Guidelines and Gabbai Guide**: http://www.jrf.org/shirhadash/services.html

- **Congregation Beit Chaverim, Atlanta, GA: Worship Guidelines**:

http://www.congregationbethaverim.org/Worship-Liturgy.asp

- **Shir Hadash, Northbrook, IL**: Complete description of various services:

http://www.shir-hadash.org/religion/services.php

- **Adat Shalom, Bethesda, MD: Religious Life Policies and Resources:**

http://www.adatshalom.net/

- **Kol Halev, Cleveland, Ohio**, http://www.kolhalev.net/services.html (inc. Guide)

- **Pardes Hannah, Ann Arbor, Siddur Development Process:**

http://www.pardeshannah.org/siddur.htm

- **New Images of God and Prayer:** The Reconstructionist, Volume 59, Spring 1994

http://www.therra.org/Reconstructionist/Spring1994.pdf

- **"Reinventing Synagogues and Prayer**" article by Sidney Schwartz in Reconstructionist Today:

Volume 8, Number 1, Autumn 2000, http://www2.jrf.org/rt/article.php?id=24;

- **The Reconstructionist Journal**, Fall [Volume 71, Number]

http://www.therra.org/Reconstructionist/Fall2006.pdf

- **JRF Education Department:** http://curriculum.jrf.org/books/bridge-prayer-jewish-worship-workbookvol-one-god-prayer-and-shema

- **RRC Audio Library:**

http://www.rrc.edu/site/c.iqLPIWOEKrF/b.2292797/k.6ABF/Audio_Clips_of_High_Holy_Day_Prayers.htm

- **Congregation Or Hadash** http://orhadash.com/prayers

- **Jewish Lights Publishing Series on Prayer:**

http://jewishlights.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Store_Code=JL&Category_Code=prayer