

The Role of Religious and Cultural Vice President

The Philosophy of a Creative Service

What are prayers? Prayer, with its root in antiquity, grew out of the need for people to turn inward as well as outward to connect with the Divine. Jews also view prayer as a time to gather as a community. There are three basic classifications of prayer: **praise, petition and thanksgiving**, and these three ingredients always comprise a Jewish worship service through the use of blessings, poetry, singing, and meditation.

In Jewish tradition, there are three daily services which correspond to the number of sacrificial offerings brought each morning and afternoon during Temple times.¹ The three services may also correspond to our three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Are the prayers in a service in any particular order?

Yes! We should begin our prayers with a proper frame of mind. We warm up with readings, songs or poems. The **Barchu** is our official call to worship. The first line of the Barchu is literally a command stated by one person to the entire congregation, and the congregation traditionally only recites the second line.

The following prayers (**Ma'ariv, Ahavat Olam, Shema, V'ahavta and G'ulah**) form a tight unit consisting of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. These are the three ways God interacts with us the world: God set the world into motion and now we are partners with God in the ongoing task of Creation, God revealed the Torah to us as Jews and now we must embark upon a life of filled with Torah, and together, God's and our actions can usher in a better world.

Next, the Jewish people as a community approach God through the **Amidah**. Originally called HaT'fillah, this prayer is the central element of the service. The Amidah consists of three opening prayers: **Avot v'Imahot, G'vurot and Kedusha**. The Avot v'Imahot acknowledges that God has been and is the shield of Jews throughout the generations, the G'vurot praises God power in God's ability to give life to all creatures, heal the sick, and free the captive. The intermediate blessings of the weekday Amidah are petitionary blessings, asking for various things. On Shabbat, these 13 blessings are replaced with one special Shabbat blessing. The final three blessings are thanking God for our lives, God's miracles and peace.

Each individual Jew has the opportunity to approach God through individual silent prayer. Some congregations use this time for each congregant to complete the Amidah on his or her own.

We read the Torah on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings. Some Reform congregations currently read Torah on Friday nights as well, either because that is when the most people come to synagogue or if there is no Bar or Bat Mitzvah the following morning. Sometimes one person gives a D'Var Torah (a word

¹ Although there were only two daily Temple sacrifices, the third evening service was a result of an argument between Rabbi Gamliel II and Rabbi Joshua over the number of daily services. The third service may also represent the "third" Temple activity of burning the two daily sacrifices.

of Torah) or a sermonette on the Torah reading, while at other times, the prayer leader may leave a short amount of time for small group text-study.

Finally, we conclude our praying by praising God. The **Aleinu** praises God's glory for establishing the Earth. We conclude with the Mourner's Kaddish which praises God.

We have come full cycle as we end our service with songs and readings.

If we solely follow this outline, we will have only done half of what is required of us as Jews. We are required not only to follow the fixed verbal order of prayer (this is known as "kevah"), but we are also required to pray with directed attention (known as "kavanah"). **Kevah** is the value of having a set body of prayers through which there is a structure to our service. If one were to wait simply for the spirit to move them, prayer might never happen. **Kavanah** is the value of not being content with the fixed body, but rather insisting that prayer is meaningless unless accompanied with sincerity, enthusiasm and kavanah.

Recognizing the danger that prayer would become a meaningless recital of words, Rabbi Aha said: "A new prayer should be said every day." To pray with real kavanah is one of the hardest things in the world. One must work extremely hard at it, and even then it might not happen. Often we get hung up on selecting readings and songs, and we begin to think that these things are what determine the quality of the service. This is not so. It is not so much the words one utters, but that which one puts into the words or tunes or silence that determines whether one has really prayed. "Words without wings are only nonsense syllables, but with proper wings, even the silliest nonsense syllables can be eloquent words."