

THE HEART OF PRAYER



The Center for Jewish Life and Learning

LESSON 1

WHY WE PRAY

GLOSSARY



PROFILE

A brief biographical account of the author noted in the body text



EXORDIUM

A brief characterization of the noted book

Why We Pray

People often ask about prayer: Does G-d really need or care for our prayers? The simple answer is no. G-d doesn't need our prayers, He wants our prayers. Why does He want our prayers? Of what value is it to him? Again, the truth is that it has no inherent value in and of itself; it has value to G-d because He values it. G-d doesn't need a world, but He wants one and wishes to have a relationship with every being in it.

Just like a relationship with other people is nurtured through giving and receiving, prayer is how we form a relationship with G-d by asking Him for our needs. Essentially, G-d created prayer as a gift to us—a means to request our needs from G-d, thereby creating a relationship with him in spite of his impossible distance from us.



Yevamot

Yevamot is the first tractate of the Talmudic order of Nashim (“Women”). It contains the laws of yibbum (levirate marriages), the union of a widow and the brother of her childless husband. It also covers chalitzah, the ritual that absolves them from marrying. The tractate also addresses the agunah, a woman whose husband's death is presumed but not verified.

Does G-d need our prayers?

Rabbi Yitzchak said: For what reason were our forefathers initially infertile? Because the Holy One, Blessed be He, desires the prayers of the righteous.

Talmud, Yevamot 64a

א"ר יצחק מפני מה היו אבותינו עקורים
מפני שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפילתן של
צדיקים

TEXT 1



Shemoneh Esrei

“Shemoneh Esrei” was formulated by the Men of the Great Assembly in the early Second Temple period. It begins with three blessings that praise God. The 13 middle blessings are requests, and the final three blessings to express thanksgiving. It is known as “Shemoneh Esrei” (“18” in Hebrew) because it contained 18 blessings (a 19th was later added). It is also known as the Amidah (“standing”) because it must be recited while standing.

Text 2 demonstrates that:

1. G-d doesn't merely listen to human prayer, but to all living beings that utter sound.
2. We finite, transient humans have the ear and interest of infinite G-d, and we need to maximize this opportunity.

For you listen to the prayers of all mouths.

Shema Koleinu, The Silent Prayer

כי אתה שומע תפילות כל פה
שמונה עשרה, שמע קולנו

TEXT 2



Genesis

The Mishnah is a collection of *halachic* rulings compiled by Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi in the third century. Seeing the suffering of the Jewish people and a reduction in Torah study, Rabbi Yehuda identified the necessity to publish the Oral Law in a single work.

The Mishnah contains six orders, each one comprised of several tractates. Tractate Keilim discusses which vessels can and cannot become ritually impure.



Birkat Hamazon

Birkat Hamazon (“Grace After Meals”) is said after a meal that included bread. It’s recited to thank G-d for providing us with our food and sustenance.

TEXT 3

If an intact clay vessel is plastered [to hold it together better].

Mishnah, Keilim 3:5

הטופל כלי חרס הבריא

משנה, כלים ג:ה

The word *tofel* demonstrates that the word *tefilah* means “connection.” *Tefilah* shares the same root with *tofel* and the same meaning of “connection.”

תפילה | טפל

TEXT 4

What is the basis for our relationship with G-d? It is the knowledge that G-d created the world and did not leave it to its own devices. Rather, G-d is constantly invested in the world and in our daily lives. Our relationship is one where G-d provides for us. Essentially, prayer is the recognition and acknowledgment that “I am in a relationship with G-d, and He provides for me every day.”

For He, benevolent G-d, provides nourishment and sustenance for all, does good to all, and prepares food for all His creatures whom He has created, as it is said: “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. Blessed are You, L-rd, Who provides food for all.”

Grace After Meals

כי הוא א-ל זן ומפרנס לכל ומטיב לכל ומכין מזון לכל בריותיו אשר ברא כאמור פותח את ידך ומשביע לכל חי רצון ברוך אתה ה' הזן את הכל.

ברכת המזון



Maimonides

Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maiman, better known by his acronym Ramba"m or Maimonides, was perhaps one of the most influential Rabbis to have ever lived. He was born in Cordova, Spain, toward the beginning of the 12th century, and wrote extensively on all areas of Jewish thought – legal, expository, and philosophical. His main works were his groundbreaking Mishneh Torah, the first attempt at a systematic codification of Jewish law, and his Moreh Nevuchim – A Guide for the Perplexed, a philosophical treatise aimed at synthesizing then contemporary philosophy with traditional Jewish thought.



Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 11:13: These verses comprise the second portion of Shema. They tell of reward for serving G-d with all one's heart, soul and might, as well as consequences of transgression. It also contains the commandments to teach Torah, lay tefillin and install mezuzahs.

TEXT 5

This commandment obligates each person to offer supplication and prayer every day, and recite praises of the Holy One, blessed be He; then petition for all his needs with requests and supplications; and finally, give praise and thanks to G-d for the goodness that He has bestowed upon him, each one according to his own ability

Maimonides 1:2

חיוב מצוה זו כך הוא שיהא אדם מתחנן ומתפלל בכל יום ומגיד שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ואח"כ שואל צרכיו שהוא צריך להם בבקשה ובתחנה ואחר כך נותן שבח והודיה לה' על הטובה שהשפיע לו כל אחד לפי כוחו:

רמב"ם א:ב

TEXT 6

To love G-d, your Lord, and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul.

לאהבה את ה' אלוהיכם ולעבדו, בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם.

TEXT 7

And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Deuteronomy 11:13

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמַעַתְּ אֶת צִוְיֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעַבְדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם:

דברים י"א י"ג

KEY SUMMARY

In sources 6 and 7, we discuss the “service of heart and soul.” This is the service of prayer. It includes our emotions, our commitment to G-d, and our verbal

enunciation of prayers. Prayer is also our substitute for the thrice-daily services in the Holy Temple.



Shulchan Aruch

Shulchan Aruch (“Set Table”) is the Code of Jewish Law authored by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the 16th century. It aggregates laws from the Talmud, rabbinic responsa and other works, and presents them in a systematic and well-ordered fashion.

TEXT 8

Can one pray in any language or must prayer be in Hebrew?

One may pray in any language they choose when [praying with] quorum. However, when praying alone, one should pray only in Hebrew. Others hold this applies only when one is praying for their personal needs: i.e., for someone of the household who is sick or in trouble, but routine prayer that is said quorum may be in any language, even by a private individual. Some hold that even for personal needs, one may pray in any language, except for Aramaic.

Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chayim, 101:4

יְכוּל לְהִתְפַּלֵּל בְּכֹל לְשׁוֹן שְׂיִרְצָה, וְהִנִּי מְלִי
בְּצַבּוּר, אֲבָל בְּיָחִיד לֹא יִתְפַּלֵּל אֶלָּא בְּלְשׁוֹן
הַקֹּדֶשׁ; וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים דְּהִנִּי מְלִי כְּשִׁשְׂוֹאֵל
צָרְכִי, כְּגוֹן שֶׁהִתְפַּלֵּל עַל חוֹלָה אוֹ עַל שׂוֹם
צַעַר שְׂיֵישׁ לוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ, אֲבָל תְּפִלָּה הַקְּבוּעָה
לְצַבּוּר, אֲפֹלוּ יָחִיד יְכוּל לְאָמְרָה בְּכֹל לְשׁוֹן;
וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים דָּאִף יָחִיד כְּשִׁשְׂוֹאֵל צָרְכִי
יְכוּל לְשָׂאֵל בְּכֹל לְשׁוֹן שְׂיִרְצָה, חוּץ מִלְּשׁוֹן
אַרְמִי.

שולחן ערוך - אורח חיים, קא:ד

Notes



Sefer Ahavah

Sefer Ahavah (“Book of Love”) is the second of the 14 books in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah. It contains the constant mitzvahs that ensure that we love G-d and constantly remember Him. The book is divided into six sections, covering the laws of Recitation of the Shema, Prayer, Tefillin and Mezuzah, Tzitzit, Blessings and Circumcision.

Notes

We have established that prayer has words that were established by the Great Assembly. There is also personal feeling and intention. There are parts of prayer where we need to contemplate a specific intention. In some instances, if there wasn’t the appropriate intent, one has not fulfilled the obligation for prayer.

15: What is the requirement for intent for prayer? And if a prayer recited without proper intention is not considered prayer, he must repeat his prayers with proper intention.

16: What is meant by [proper] intention?

One should clear his mind from all other thoughts and envision himself standing before the Divine Presence. Therefore, one must sit a short while before praying in order to focus his attention, and then pray in a pleasant and supplicatory fashion.

One should not pray as one carrying a burden who throws it off and walks away. Therefore, one must sit a short while after praying, and then leave.

The pious ones of the previous generations would tarry an hour before praying and an hour after praying. They would [also] extend their prayers for an hour.

Maimonides, Laws of Prayer - Chapter 4

ט"ו: כוונת הלב כיצד כל תפלה שאינה בכוונה אינה תפלה ואם התפלל בלא כוונה חוזר ומתפלל בכוונה:

ט"ז: כיצד היא הכוונה שיפנה את לבו מכל המחשבות ויראה עצמו כאלו הוא עומד לפני השכינה לפיכך צריך לישב מעט קודם התפלה כדי לכיין את לבו ואח"כ יתפלל בנחת ובתחנונים ולא יעשה תפלתו כמי שהיה נושא משאוי ומשליכו והולך לו לפיכך צריך לישב מעט אחר התפלה ואחר כך יפטר חסידים הראשונים היו שוהין שעה אחת קודם תפלה ושעה אחת לאחר תפלה ומאריכין בתפלה שעה:

רמב"ם הלכות תפילה פרק ד'



Shulchan Aruch HaRav

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi was just 25 when he was assigned by his teacher, the Maggid of Mezrich, the task of writing an updated Shulchan Aruch (“Code

One should not pray merely in his heart. Rather, he should articulate the words with his lips and whisper them audibly

Shulchan Aruch Harav - Laws of Prayer, 101:2

לא יתפלל בלבבו לבד, אלא מִחַתָּךְ הַדְּבָרִים בְּשִׁפְתַי וּמִשְׁמִיעַ לְאָזְנוֹי בְּלִחְשׁ.

שולחן ערוך הרב - הלכות תפילה, קא:ב

of Jewish Law”). Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s new version took into account rulings from later authors and commentaries. In addition, it included the principles and reasoning underlying each *halachic* decision.

Notes

Lined area for taking notes, consisting of 18 horizontal lines.

Notes

Lined area for taking notes, consisting of 12 horizontal lines.

KEY SUMMARY

In summation:

G-d doesn’t need our prayer; G-d wants our prayer. We need prayer because it is our way to connect and create a relationship between the finite and the infinite. Prayer is also our way of acknowledging that everything we need and have comes from G-d. The Great Assembly created a template of prayer thrice daily, and these prayers are a most meaningful way to communicate with G-d. Yet we still need to infuse them with our personal passion and emotions to make it our own personal prayer. This is the reason prayer in Hebrew is preferred because it

contains the original intent and meaning of the Great Assembly. However, if you don’t know Hebrew, you can certainly pray from a translation. And finally, since we have such an opportunity every day to communicate with G-d, shouldn’t we be prepared to do it properly? Learning prayer and investing time to set the correct mindframe are invaluable to making the most of prayer. In Lesson 2, we will continue with the structure of daily prayer.

NOTES
