
OVERVIEW OF THE AMIDAH I

The Establishment, Structure, and Purpose of the Amidah

One of the most significant prayers in Judaism and the heart of the daily prayers is the Amidah. It is an expression of many of the fundamental tenets of Judaism, accompanied by requesting God for our most basic needs in life. The word “Amidah” means “standing,” for that is the position in which it is recited. It is also often referred to as the Shemonah Esrei, the Eighteen, after the number of blessings this prayer originally contained. Composed at the beginning of the Second Temple period by the Men of the Great Assembly, the Amidah guides us when we pray to God, showing profound gratitude and expressing our deepest aspirations and concerns.

There are two Morasha classes on the Amidah. In this first class, we will focus on the origin and composition of the Amidah, its basic structure and purpose. In the next class we will focus on how to pray the Amidah – in thought and action.

The Morasha shiur on Prayer is recommended as a prerequisite for this class.

This class will address the following questions:

- What is the importance of the Amidah?
- Why and when was the Amidah composed?
- What is the structure of the Amidah and how many blessings are there?
- Why do we follow a set text and have fixed times for prayer? Isn't it better to pray spontaneously when we feel the inspiration to do so?

Class Outline:

- Section I. Composing the Amidah
 - Part A. A Brief History of Prayer
 - Part B. Later Variations
 - Part C. The Nineteenth Blessing – Birkat HaMinnim (Blessing Against Heretics)

- Section II. The Far Reach of the Amidah

- Section III. Structure of the Amidah
 - Part A. Praise, Request and Thanks
 - Part B. Expressing Our Needs
 - Part C. Time to Pray

- Section IV. Why Standardized Prayer?
 - Part A. Profound Words
 - Part B. Quality Time

SECTION I. COMPOSING THE AMIDAH

As we learned in the Morasha shiur on Prayer, *tefillah* (prayer) is one of the three pillars of Judaism: Torah, Avodah (prayer) and practicing kindness. Formalized prayer as we know it today, was established by the Men of the Great Assembly about 2,500 years ago in response to the impact of the First Temple destruction and Babylonian exile. The result was the *siddur* (standardized prayer book), including the Amidah, as well as fixed times for prayer.

PART A. A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRAYER.

1. Talmud Bavli – Megillah 17b – The text of the Amidah was composed by the Men of the Great Assembly.

Rabbi Yochanan said, others say it was taught in a Beraita, that 120 elders including many prophets established the eighteen blessings in the order that we have today.

אמר רבי יוחנן ואמרי לה במתניתא תנא מאה ועשרים
זקנים ובהם כמה נביאים תיקנו שמונה עשרה ברכות
על הסדר

The Amidah was originally composed by an ancient body of prophets and Torah scholars known as the Men of the Great Assembly. This unique assemblage was comprised of the greatest Torah scholars and prophets of the generation, who lived between the First and Second Temples (around the 4th century BCE). They led the Jewish people during the transition from the exile in Babylonia and Persia to the return to the land of Israel, and oversaw the building of the Second Temple. As we shall see below, one of the most significant of these enactments was the standardizing of Jewish prayer in the form of the Amidah.

2. Rabbeinu Bachya, Kad HaKemach, (Translation by Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel), pp. 663-664 – Before the Amidah was established, people prayed using whatever words they wanted to.

You should know that from the days of Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses) until the period of the Men of the Great Assembly, prayer in Israel was not arranged in a definite order for everyone alike. Each individual prayed for himself according to his knowledge, wisdom, and clarity of expression. This was the general practice until the Men of the Great Assembly ordained the Amidah, so that there would be a set prayer for all the people of Israel alike.

וצריך אתה לדעת כי מימות משה רבינו עד אנשי כנסת
הגדולה היתה התפילה בישראל בלתי מסודרת בתיקון
שוה לכלנו, שהיה כל א' וא' עושה מליצה ומתפלל
לעצמו כפי ידיעתו וחכמתו וצחות לשונו, עד שבאו
אנשי כנסת הגדולה ותקנו תפילה זו של שמונה עשרה
כדי שתהיה תפילה מסודרת שוה לכל ישראל.

Why did the Men of the Great Assembly standardize Jewish prayer?

3. Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 1:4-5 – During the exile that followed the destruction of the First Temple, there arose the need to compose a coherent prayer that could be used by those no longer fluent in Hebrew.

When Israel was exiled in the time of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, they mixed with Persia, Greece and the other nations. They had children in those foreign lands. Those children spoke mixed languages and each person's language was made

כיון שגלו ישראל בימי נבוכדנאצר הרשע, נתערבו
בפרס ויוון ושאר האומות, ונולדו להם בנים בארצות
הגויים; ואותן הבנים נתבלבלה שפתם, והיתה שפת כל
אחד ואחד מעורבת מלשונות הרבה.

up of many different languages.

When a person would speak he would not be able to express himself properly because of the language confusion. This is the meaning of the verse “and their children spoke half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the language of Jews, but according to the language of each people” (Nechemiah 13:24).

Because of this, when each person would pray, he would be unable to fully express all his needs or to say the full praise of God in Hebrew without using other languages as well. When Ezra and his court saw this they arose and established for them the Amidah blessings and their order.

וכיון שהיה מדבר, אינו יכול לדבר כל צרכו בלשון אחת
אלא בשיבוש, שנאמר “ובניהם חצי מדבר אשדודית
וגו” (נחמיה יג, כד), ואינם מכירים לדבר יהודית וכלשון
עם ועם...

ומפני זה, כשהיה אחד מהן מתפלל, תקצר לשונו
לשאול חפציו או להגיד שבח הקדוש ברוך הוא בלשון
הקודש, עד שיערב עימה לשונות אחרות. וכיון שראה
עזרא ובית דינו כך, עמדו ותיקנו להם שמונה עשרה
ברכות על הסדר.

4. **Rabbeinu Bachya, Commentary to Parshat Eikev 11:13 – The prayer was composed in a language easily understood by the common man.**

The Men of the Great Assembly instituted this prayer of the Amidah in order that it should be fluent in every mouth. Therefore they instituted it using simple language, in order not to confuse the ideas with their understanding of the language, and so that all of Israel would be equal in prayer, whether they were clever or foolish.

אנשי כנסת הגדולה תקנו תפלה זו של שמונה עשרה,
כדי שתהיה מסודרת בפי הכל, ולכך תקנוה בלשון
פשוט מובן, כדי שלא יתבלבלו הרעיונים בהבנת
הלשון ושיהיו כל ישראל שוין בה בין חכמים ובין
טפשים.

Hence, with the Amidah, prayer became the great equalizer. It also became a great unifier.

5. **Rabbi Berel Wein, Crash Course in Jewish History, from www.jewishhistory.org – The composition of the Amidah helped maintain Jewish unity after exile and dispersion.**

[One] monumental accomplishment of the Men of the Great Assembly was the formulation of a universal Jewish prayer service.

Today, the centerpiece of every service is the prayer known as the *Amidah* (literally the “standing” prayer). It and its attendant prayers were apparently absent in the First Temple era. The need for such a formalized prayer only first arose when the Jews went into exile in Babylon. During the exile, the communal experience of the three-times-a-year pilgrimage to the Temple left a vacuum. Without the Temple, essential nutrients in the peoples’ religious diet were lacking. Therefore, the leaders in Babylon codified a system of prayer that substituted for the Temple service. They based this on the prophetic verse, “Our lips will substitute for sacrifices” (*Hosea* 14:3).

When the Jews returned from Babylon to the Land of Israel and rebuilt the Temple, they brought along with them the prayers they had learned in Babylon. The Men of the Great Assembly arranged, placed in order, edited, and formulated the words of the *Amidah*, as well as its accompanying prayers. This arrangement continued through the entire Second Temple era and has continued until today.

Although the individual synagogue system was inferior, it successfully compensated for the shift in

Jewish life away from the centralized Temple system. Now, with the stamp of approval from the Men of the Great Assembly, Jewish prayer became possible in each community, by each individual, no matter how far away he/she was. Instituting prayer this way not only substituted for the Temple service but compensated for the loss of its central place in Jewish life.

PART B. LATER VARIATIONS

While the Amidah was originally composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, over time variations crept into the prayer. In addition, after the destruction of the Second Temple, certain key amendments needed to be made in the text of the prayers.

In the second century of the Common Era, the Sages of the Jewish people finalized the version of the Amidah as we have it today (only very slight variations in wording still exist between Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Sephard, and Arizal versions of the text).

1. Meir Holder, *History of the Jewish People: From Yavneh to Pumbedisa*, Mesorah Publications, pg. 27 – The Amidah was finalized after the destruction of the Second Temple.

From the very beginning, prayer – both public and individual – had always been a part of Jewish life. And these prayers had been given specific formulation by the Men of the Great Assembly, who composed the Amidah, which forms the backbone of the prayer service. During the centuries, however, a number of variations had crept into the text of this prayer; moreover, during the troubled times preceding the Destruction some confusion arose about the correct order in which the blessings were to be recited.

While the Temple stood, the people were unified by the fact that they had a central, national place of worship. Now that the prayers of their lips were to take the place of the sacrifices offered in the Temple, the people would be unified by the fact that, wherever they were, they spoke the same words when praying to God. It now became urgent, therefore, that the different variations that had crept into the Amidah be brought together into one unified text with the proper order. Furthermore, the destruction of Jerusalem and the suspension of the Temple service required that a number of important amendments be made in the content of the prayers. For example, prayers for the continued *survival* of Jerusalem and the Temple service had to be changed to prayers for the *rebuilding* of Jerusalem and the *return* of the Temple service.

The man who undertook the task of unifying the text of the Amidah was Shimon HaPekoli.

Shimon HaPekoli was a contemporary of Rabban Gamliel, the first leader of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Supreme Court) once it moved to Yavneh after the destruction of the Second Temple (around 70 CE).

2. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 28b – Shimon HaPekoli arranged the Amidah.

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

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

PART C. THE NINETEENTH BLESSING – BIRKAT HAMINNIM (BLESSING AGAINST HERETICS)

The turmoil at the end of the Second Temple and its subsequent destruction was accompanied by the rise of a number of heretical movements among the Jewish People. Sensing the threat posed by these groups to

the survival of traditional Judaism, an additional blessing was incorporated into the Amidah with the goal of preventing their intermingling within Jewish society. *Birkat HaMinnim*, the blessing against heretics, served to make those groups no longer feel comfortable praying in synagogues where the new blessing to the Amidah was added. This addition was also instituted under the auspices of Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh.

1. **Rambam Hilchot Tefillah 2:1 – The extra blessing was instituted in response to the threat posed by heretical groups**

In the time of Rabban Gamliel the heretics increased amongst Israel, and they were harming Israel and leading them away from God. When he saw that this needed addressing more than the people's other needs, he and his Beit Din arose and established a blessing that is a request from God to destroy those heretics. He fixed it in the Amidah in order that it should be well known in the mouths of everyone. Thus the total number of blessings is nineteen.

בימי רבן גמליאל רבו המינים בישראל, והיו מצירין לישראל, ומסיתים אותם לשוב מאחרי ה'. וכיון שראה שזו גדולה מכל צורכי בני אדם, עמד הוא ובית דינו, והתקין ברכה אחת שתהיה בה שאלה מלפני ה' לאבד את המינים; וקבע אותה בתפילה, כדי שתהא ערוכה בפי הכול. ונמצאו הברכות שבתפילה, תשע עשרה ברכות.

The man commissioned to author this 19th blessing was someone known as Shmuel HaKatan (Samuel the Small). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 11a) relates that he was called “the Small” not because of his physical stature but rather only in comparison to the prophet with the same name: Shmuel HaNavi. While the term implies that he was the lesser of two great men, the comparison itself is a tribute to his greatness. Below we shall explore the significance of his authorship. Alternatively, the name is a tribute to his great humility.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 28b – Shmuel HaKatan was selected to compose a new blessing, known as the blessing against the heretics, to be added to the eighteen blessings of the Amidah.**

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

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

Who was Shmuel HaKatan? Pirkei Avot, which records the main teachings of many Jewish leaders from Moshe Rabeinu through the time of the Mishnah, states that Shmuel HaKatan was known for repeating a particular verse from Mishlei (Proverbs). Considering his authorship of the blessing against heretics, his personal motto strikes us as surprising.

3. **Pirkei Avot 4:19 – Shmuel HaKatan did not believe in rejoicing over the downfall of one's enemy.**

Samuel the Small would say: “When your enemy falls, do not rejoice; when he stumbles, let your heart not be gladdened. Perhaps God will see, and it will be displeasing in His eyes, and He will turn His anger from him [to you]” (Proverbs 24:17-18).

שמואל הקטן אומר (משלי כד) בנפול אויבך אל תשמח ובכשלו אל יגל לבך פן יראה ה' ורע בעיניו והשיב מעליו אפו:

The truth is that it is not despite his attitude toward enemies that Shmuel HaKatan was chosen to compose the blessing against heretics, but because of it.

4. **Rabbi Irving M. Bunim, Ethics from Sinai, Volume II, pg. 615 – Only Shmuel HaKatan could have authored the blessing against heretics.**

[T]he Sages found it vitally necessary to add this paragraph. The infidel heretics had simply become too much. But only a man who bore no trace of personal animosity in his heart could set forth the words. In a prayer before the portals of Heaven, seeking Divine protection for the people of Israel in its historic destiny, that its life and faith might be safe, there was no room for personal vindictiveness or malicious hatred. Only Shmuel the “Little One,” humble and unassuming, formed it – the man who could not rejoice if a personal enemy fell. His words of prayer could flow from a pure love for his people, a yearning for their safety, and a desire to see their living Judaism guarded against inner destruction.

Since this blessing was added, the Amidah came to have nineteen blessings. Why then is it still called Shemonah Esrei (the Eighteen)?

5. **Siddur Otzar Hatefillot, pg. 154a – The Amidah is called Shemonah Esrei (Eighteen) and not T’sha Esrei (nineteen) due to tradition.**

The reason that they didn’t change the name to call it the nineteen blessings is because the name was already well known by the people from the time of those who first established it until the present. Therefore they didn’t want to change the name.

מה שלא שנו את שמיה לקרותה תשע עשרה לפי שהשם הזה כבר הורגל בפי העם מימי המתקנים הראשונים עד ימיהם, לכך לא רצו לשנותו.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I.

- ∞ The weakened state of the Jewish people after the destruction of the First Temple and exile to Babylonia led the Men of the Great Assembly to compose the Amidah. This body of towering scholars and prophets authored eighteen of the blessings of the Amidah in a manner and style that would be meaningful for both scholar and layman.
- ∞ The prayer was only finalized hundreds of years later, after the destruction of the Second Temple. In addition to amendments in the standard text, a new prayer was added to guard against the influence of heretics. This prayer was composed with sincerity and without a trace of vengeance by the great sage Shmuel HaKatan.
- ∞ Although it now contains nineteen blessings, the Amidah is still referred to as the *Shemonah Esrei*, the “Eighteen,” after its original number of blessings.

SECTION II. THE FAR REACH OF THE AMIDAH

Our prayers carry our deepest yearnings and aspirations to places that are not readily conceivable. In *Kabbalistic* teachings there are four levels of worlds. God interacts with the universe by permeating these four worlds, each of which follows another in a progression. Our prayers travel through the four worlds, beginning from our terrestrial sphere. Ultimately, as we stand in the Shemonah Esrei, we reach the highest level and communicate with God Himself! It is in this context that we can appreciate the incredible power of our prayers.

1. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem (The Way of God), translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers, IV:6:13, p. 321 – There are four worlds.**

It is also necessary to realize that there are four different worlds. The physical world consists of two components – the celestial and the terrestrial. The celestial is the realm of the stars and planets, while the terrestrial is our realm, here on earth. The two together comprise a single world – the physical. Above this is yet another world, namely the world of angels. Higher than this is yet another world, a third world, that of the highest Forces, as discussed earlier in the first section. This third world is called “The World of the Throne.” On a still higher level we can speak in general of different Influences emanating from God, revelations of His Light, from which the existence of everything in Creation is derived (see the third section, chapter two). In a manner of speaking, the realm of these Influences also can be termed a “World,” one which usually is called “The World of God.”

עוד צריך שתדע שהנה כלל העולמות מתחלק לארבעה: והיינו עולם הזה בשני חלקיו עליון ותחתון, שהם החלק השמימי ונקרא עולם הגלגלים, והיסודי, והוא הנקרא עולם השפל, וכלל שניהם נקרא עולם אחד. ועל העולם הזה יש עולם המלאכים, ועליו עולם הכחות העליונים – שרשי הבריות שזכרנו בחלק ראשון, ונקרא עולם הכסא, והנה למעלה מהן במדרגה יבחו כלל השפעותיו יתברך, גלויי אורו שמהם נמשכים כל המציאויות כלם ובהם הם תלויים, וכמו שזכרנו בחלק שלישי פרק שני, והנה על דרך השאלה נקרא לכלל כל ההשפעות האלה עולם אחד, ונקראהו עולם האלקות.

In Kabbalistic terminology, these four worlds are called the worlds of *Asiyah* (doing), *Yetzirah* (shaping), *B'riah* (creating), and *Atzilut* (the spirit).

2. **Ibid., p. 325 – The structure of our daily prayers parallels the four-world structure of Creation.**

The four parts of the daily prayer service actually parallel the four-part structure of Creation. The first three parts of the service rectify the lower worlds. That is, the readings about the offerings (*Korbanot*) pertain to the physical world, the praises (*Pesukei d'Zimrah*) to the world of the angels, the *Shema* and its blessings to the world of the Throne. Afterwards is the *Amidah*, parallel to the World of God, the *Amidah* serving as a catalyst helping to incite the emanations from God in all their aspects.

The *Amidah* is followed by three other prayers, each contributing to draw downwards a continuation of the emanations, world to world. These are the *Kedushah* for the Order [in *u'Va l'Tzion*], the Psalm of the day, and “None Is Like Our God” (*Ein k'Elokeinu*). At the end of the service, having partaken of God's blessing, we say *Aleinu*, to reiterate that God is King, and to spread His Kingship over all the worlds.

והנה על פי סדר זה נתקנו חלקי התפילה, דהיינו שלשה חלקים בתחילה לתקן שלשה העולמות: עולם הזה, עולם המלאכים, עולם הכסא, וזה, בקרבנות, זמירות, וברכות קריאת שמע. אחר כך תפילה מעומד, והוא כנגד עולם האלקות, להמשיך ההשפעות לפי בחינותיהן,

ואחר כך שלשה חלקים אחרים, להמשיך משך השפע לעולמות זה אחר זה. לבסוף, והיינו קדושה דסידרא, שיר הלויים, ואין כאלקינו, ואחר כל זה עלינו, והוא לחזור ולהמליך מלכותו יתברך על כל העולמות אחר שנתברכו ממנו.

What is the nature of each of these worlds, and how do they represent a sequence?

3. **Adapted from Rabbi Eliyahu Munk, *The World of Prayer*, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 11-12 – The sequence of the Four Worlds represents a progression in the quest for truth, and that path is followed every day in the daily prayer service.**

The “Four Worlds of the Kabbalah” are: the sphere of material phenomena – עולם העשייה (“the World of Doing”); that of the forms – עולם היצירה (“the World of Shaping”); that of the active forces – עולם הבריאה (“the World of Creating”); and finally the world of the pure ideas – עולם האצילות (“the World of the Spirit”). Our daily prayer service reflects these four dimensions. The quest for truth must pass through all these four stages if it is to succeed.

From our experience in the world of sense perception, the mind extracts the immanent laws of the perceived things, their “forms” which make them what they are. Then it is led, by logical analysis, to seek their causes, the forces that create these forms; finally it penetrates to the Supreme Reason, which is the innermost soul and prime cause moving and controlling the lower worlds. The path traversed by the inquiring mind, however, is the very same one along which the thoughts of the worshipper must pass ... to ascend to the Divine presence of the Creator. It is no wonder, then, that our daily Morning Prayer, in its four main parts, reflects the ascent through the “four worlds.” These parts are: The first from the ברכות up to ברוך שאמר, the second from ברוך שאמר to ברכו, the third up to גאל ישראל, and the fourth is the שמונה עשרה.

4. **Ibid. – The progression of our quest for God in the daily prayers.**

In the first section (till ברוך שאמר), man’s practical needs, like awakening and clothing are mentioned. A blessing for the work and welfare of the day follows. Then a description of the daily sacrifice, also a practical matter, is added. Thus the entire beginning is devoted to the עולם העשייה, the world of material phenomena, the point from which the quest for God must set out.

The second division, the פסוקי דזמרה deals with God’s revelations of Himself in nature and history. The splendor of nature, the magnificence of the starry sky, the beauty of the reality of our world all proclaim the glory of God. Thus our thoughts rise from the world of human activity to the עולם היצירה, the world of the forms and shapes which are the background and the framework of the activities of our daily life. Behind the עולם היצירה we can discern the עולם הבריאה to which the third section for prayers is devoted, the world of the forces that dominate the Creation.

What “forces” in the world of *B’riah* are expressed in prayer and lead to the world of pure spirit?

5. **Ibid, pp. 12-13 – The forces in the world of *B’riah* and the ultimate progression to the world of *Atzilut*, represented by the Shemoneh Esrei (Amidah) prayer.**

There are three kinds of forces: the forces of nature, the spiritual and moral ones, and finally those of history and destiny. The three blessings which now follow conform to these three forces. The first one יוצר אור reminds us of the powers active in nature. The “Divine light” attended upon the creation of the Universe, and through its radiation, the world renews itself daily. Even darkness, apparently the negation of light, is not a destructive force. It takes its turn in the service of God.

The second blessing אהבה רבה expresses the idea that God is the ruler over the moral forces active in our world. Yet while the forces that dominate the mechanical, determined world of nature are renewed by God every day, man is free to use the moral and spiritual powers at will, and so must rely upon himself. He can only humbly pray for support from on High: “Enlighten our eyes through thy Torah; make our hearts cleave to Thy commandments,” that he may come to proclaim with every fiber of his

being the unity and mastery of God – שמע ישראל.

The third blessing גאל ישראל flows from the first two. God alone rules over all the forces in the Universe, natural and spiritual. He alone has the power to determine its destiny. Evidence of this is the outstanding event in Jewish history, the Exodus.

It is the realization that God is the source and the master of all the forces of the cosmos that guides us to the highest rung of the heavenly ladder, the עולם האצילות – the world of pure spirit. The worshipper enters this world at the climactic moment of his prayer, at the שמונה עשרה. Now he stands in silent prayer in the presence of God.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ⇒ Our prayers travel through four worlds, beginning from our terrestrial sphere. Ultimately, as we stand in the Shemonah Esrei, we reach the highest level and communicate with God Himself! We do not need an intermediary.
- ⇒ God's interaction with the world actually permeates a structure of four universes, each of which follows another in a progression. In fact, each world is considered the “soul” of the world before it.
- ⇒ These Four Worlds are *Asiyah* (the world of doing – our physical world), *Yetzirah* (the world of shaping – the laws and forms which make the phenomena in our physical world), *B'riah* (the world of creating – the forces that create those forms), and *Atzilut* (the world of the spirit).
- ⇒ These Four Worlds are manifested in the progression of our daily prayers. The realization that God is the Source and Master of all the forces of the cosmos guides us to the highest rung of the heavenly ladder, the עולם האצילות – the world of pure spirit. This highest level is accessed when we stand before God in the Shemonah Esrei.

SECTION III. STRUCTURE OF THE AMIDAH

If you had an appointment with the President in order to discuss a pressing matter that would affect your business or your community, you would make sure to do your homework and prepare an agenda before the actual meeting. Following polite introductory words, the most important issues would be placed on the table first. At the conclusion you would be sure to express your gratitude for his finding time to meet with you. How much more so is it behooving for us to speak to the Master of the Universe in a similarly attentive manner?

PART A. PRAISE, REQUEST AND GRATITUDE

The nineteen blessings of the Amidah are divided into three sections: praise, requests, and thanks. The Talmud says that in the first three blessings we are to liken ourselves to a servant praising his master (upon whom he is dependent for everything) before he dares request anything from him (which are the middle blessings). In the last three blessings each of us should act like a servant thanking his master for what he has received (or with complete confidence that the master will fulfill his requests) and then take leave from him.

1. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 32a – When Moshe prayed, he prefaced his prayer with praises of God.

Rabbi Simlai expounded: A man should always first recount the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, and then pray. From where do we know this? From Moshe; for it is written, (Devarim/Deuteronomy 3:23), “And I beseeched the Lord at that time.” And it is written, (Devarim 3:24), “O Lord God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand; for what god is there in heaven and earth who can do according to Your works and according to Your mighty acts,” and afterwards is written, (Devarim 3:25), “Let me go over, I pray You, and see the good land etc.”

דרש רבי שמלאי: לעולם יסדר אדם שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ואחר כך יתפלל. מנלן - ממושה דכתיב (דברים ג:כג) ואתחנן אל ה' בעת ההיא; וכתיב (דברים ג:כד) ה' אלהים אתה החלת להראות את עבדך את גדלך ואת ירך החזקה אשר מי אל בשמים ובארץ אשר יעשה כמועשיך וכגבורותיך, וכתיב בתריה (דברים ג:כה) אעברה נא ואראה את הארץ הטובה וגו'.

2. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 34a – The Amidah is arranged like a servant addressing his master.

Rabbi Yehudah said: A man should never petition for his needs in either the first three blessings or in the last three, but rather in the middle ones. For Rabbi Hanina said: In the first ones he resembles a servant who is addressing a tribute to his master; in the middle ones he resembles a servant who is requesting a largess from his master; in the last ones he resembles a servant who has received a largess from his master and takes his leave.

אמר רב יהודה: לעולם אל ישאל אדם צרכיו לא בשלש ראשונות, ולא בשלש אחרונות, אלא באמצעיות. דאמר רבי חנינא: ראשונות - דומה לעבד שמסדר שבח לפני רבו. אמצעיות - דומה לעבד שמבקש פרס מרבו. אחרונות - דומה לעבד שקבל פרס מרבו ונפטר והולך לו.

When they composed the Amidah, the Men of the Great Assembly adhered to the basic the structure of prayer originally practiced by Moshe and perpetuated by the Jewish people until that point in history.

3. Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 1:2, 4 – The Amidah's three sections are all-encompassing.

The mitzvah [to pray] is as follows: A person should 1) pray and petition every day and tell praises of God, and thereafter 2) beseech and petition for his needs that he lacks, and thereafter 3) give praise and thanksgiving to God for the good that He bestowed on him, everyone according to his abilities.

And when Ezra and his Court saw [the situation as it was] they arose and instituted for the people eighteen blessings in order: the first three are praise to God, the last three are of gratitude, and the middle contain requests for all the things encompassing all the categories of each individual's needs, and communal needs.

אלא חיוב מצוה זו, כך הוא שיהא אדם מתחנן ומתפלל בכל יום, ומגיד שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואחר כך שואל צרכיו שהוא צריך להם בבקשה ובתחינה. ואחר כך נותן שבח והודיה לה' על הטובה שהשפיע לו: כל אחד כפי כוחו.

וכיון שראה עזרא ובית דינו כך, עמדו ותיקנו להם שמונה עשרה ברכות על הסדר: שלוש ראשונות, שבח לה'; ושלוש אחרונות, הודיה; ואמצעיות, יש בהן שאילת כל הדברים שהן כמו אבות לכל חפצי איש ואיש, ולצורכי הציבור.

4. **Rabbi Dr. Elie Munk, The World of Prayer pg. 122 – The first three blessings and the last three mirror each other.**

These three first blessings describe God as the source of all that exists, the Master of Nature. They provide an answer to the three ultimate questions: Who governs the universe? What are His powers? What influences Him? And the answers are: - “You are the God of our fathers; You are the merciful Provider and Protector; You are not influenced by earthly considerations.” The first Beracha is consequently called *Avot*. In the second we declare God to be omnipotent, *Gevurot*. Finally in the *Kedusha*, He is praised as the holy One Who guides the world in holiness, detached from all earthly influences and Who is, therefore, feared by all.

The last three blessings of the Amidah treat the relationship of the receiver to the giver. They run parallel to the first three, and they answer the questions: “Who are *we*? What are *our* powers? What influences *us*?” The answers are “We are God’s servants” *Avodah*. We are powerless, dependent upon Him and therefore filled with gratitude *Hodaah*. In everything we are subject to Divine rule and only the heavenly harmony of peace, within and without, maintains our existence amidst the conflict of discordant forces, *Shalom*.

PART B. EXPRESSING OUR NEEDS

The bulk of the Amidah consists of requests to God for our various needs as individuals and as a nation. Expressing our needs to God is a valuable means of developing a personal relationship with Him.

1. **Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, Siddur Hatefila, p. 344 – Beseeching God helps us to connect to Him in a personal way.**

The goal of prayer is not the requests [that we ask from God] themselves but rather the connection to and relationship with God. However, man’s requests, needs and wants are the strongest means [for us] to connect with God: we ask, receive, and give thanks.

תכלית התפילה אינה הבקשות כשלעצמן, אלא החיבור והשייכות עם הקב"ה. אלא שהבקשות והצרכים והרצונות של האדם הם האמצעי החזק ביותר להתקשר עם הקב"ה- אנו מבקשים מקבלים ומוודים.

While many people recognize requests from God as the essence of prayer, in a certain vein it seems strange to ask God for things that He already knows we want. Furthermore, if He hasn’t given us what we want yet, He has a good reason; who are we to try to change His mind?

2. **Rabbi Abraham Twerski, Twerski on Prayer (reprinted by innernet.org.il) – Prayer is supposed to change us, not God.**

One of the problems that many theologians have grappled with is: “Why and how does prayer work?” If a sick person prays for recovery, he is assuming that God has allowed him to become sick. Is he to believe that his prayer can make God change His mind?

One of the answers given is that there is a constant outpouring of Divine benevolence to the world. Just as the sun radiates light, yet there are areas of darkness in enclosures where the sunlight does not reach, so does the Divine benevolence not reach where there are barriers that obstruct it. These barriers are a person’s actions that are contrary to the will of God.

Genuine, sincere prayer brings a person into a closer relationship with God. The barriers to the Divine benevolence are thereby removed or circumvented, and the person can then receive this benevolence.

The blessing and improvement in the person's health is not the result of a change in God's will, but of a change in the status of the recipient.

Genuine prayer brings about a transformation in a person. The newly emerging person can be receptive of the Divine benevolence to which the former person was impervious.

It always behooves us to ask God for our needs even while knowing that He has withheld them until now. Prayer is intrinsically an act of recognizing God in our lives, and when we do that we open the gates of blessing.

3. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Prayer: Creating Dialogue with Hashem, pg. 17 n3 – It is God's will that goodness be generated through prayer.**

Although Hashem wants our good, He decreed for a reason known only to Him that this good would only emerge as a result of our requesting it, of our praying with the full recognition that He wants to bestow good on us in every possible respect. This is made clear in the Torah's account of Creation: "Now any tree of the field was not yet on the earth and any herb of the field had not yet sprouted... and there was no man to work the soil" (Bereishit/Genesis 2:4-5). Rashi expounds on this verse that there was no one to recognize the goodness of rain. When Adam came and recognized that rain is necessary for the world, he prayed for rain. Rain came down, and then the trees and vegetation sprouted. Certainly, Hashem does not want a barren world; rather it is His will that goodness be generated specifically through prayer.

This may explain why a person's prayer on his own behalf is effective. But the Amidah includes many prayers that are for the betterment of others as well. How is prayer effective when one person prays for another?

4. **Rabbi Abraham Twerski, Twerski on Prayer (reprinted by innernet.org.il) – We pray to God for others so that God will relieve the unwarranted pain we feel at their suffering.**

The Talmud says that if a member of the family is sick, "let him go to a Torah scholar and ask him to pray for him." In this case, the sick person is not undergoing a character transformation that would make him a new person. How can the scholar's prayer cause God to change His mind? ...

We can further understand why prayer may be effective even though God does not change His mind.

For reasons known only to God, Divine justice may decree that a particular person must undergo suffering. This person shares his pain with a friend, who is so moved by his friend's distress that he suffers along with him and prays for him. However, Divine justice never decreed that the second person suffer. Therefore, in order to relieve the friend from unwarranted suffering, Divine justice requires that the first person be relieved of his distress.

The concern for the friend's suffering must be sincere. This is why the Talmud says that if one prays on another person's behalf rather than pray for himself, his own prayers are answered quickly.

The Amidah aims to cover all our needs, spiritual as well as physical, individual as well as communal. Priority, though, is given to the spiritual.

5. **Rabbi Yehudah HaChasid, Sefer HaChasidim 752 – Priority is given to spiritual needs before one's physical needs.**

A person should not pray for his needs first, until

אל יהא אדם מבקש צרכיו תחלה עד שיבקש כל חפציו

he has prayed for spiritual needs. For [the Sages] first established “You give wisdom” and afterwards “Cause us to return, our Father,” then “Forgive us” and only afterwards personal needs.

שמים, שהרי תקנו תחלה אתה חונן ואח"כ השיבנו
אבינו, ואח"כ סלח לנו ואח"כ צרכיו.

An in-depth analysis of each blessing is the beyond the scope of this class, but a general outline of the blessings and the needs they relate to look as follows:

6. Based on Elie Munk, *The World of Prayer, Volume I*, pg. 172.

Self:

Spiritual needs: Knowledge, Repentance, Forgiveness

Physical needs: End to Strife, Healing, Rain (livelihood) and Gathering the Jews in Exile

Community:

Spiritual needs: Restoration of Judges, Destruction of Heresy, Reward for the Faithful

Physical Needs: Jerusalem, Mashiach (Messiah), Acceptance of Prayers

PART C. TIME TO PRAY

In a healthy marriage, a husband and wife make sure to call at regular intervals during the day - even if it means just a quick hello. In our ongoing relationship with our Creator, we also strive to maintain regular contact at the critical junctures of the day. Our Sages find even deeper hidden meaning in the number of times that we pray during the day.

1. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 26b – The Patriarchs introduced three prayers.

Rabbi Yossi bar Rabbi Chaninah said: The prayers were instituted by the Forefathers ... Avraham (Abraham) established the morning prayer as it is stated ... “And Avraham went in the morning to the place that he had stood (*ammad*) [before] God.” (Bereishit 19:26). “*Amidah*” is a term specifically used for prayer as it is stated, “And Pinchas stood (*veyamod*) and prayed” (Tehillim/Psalms 106:30).

Yitzchak (Isaac) established the afternoon prayer as it says, “And Yitzchak went to meditate (*lasuach*) in the field just before evening” (Bereishit 24:63), and “*sichah*” is an expression specifically used for prayer.

Yaakov (Jacob) established the evening prayer as it says, “[And Yaakov left Beersheva and went

רבי יוסי ברבי חנינא אמר: תפלות אבות תקנום ...
אברהם תקן תפילת שחרית שנא' וישכם אברהם
בבקר אל המקום אשר עמד שם ואין עמידה אלא
תפילה שנאמר ויעמד פינחס ויפלל.

יצחק תקן תפלת מנחה שנאמר ויצא יצחק לשוח
בשדה לפנות ערב ואין שיחה אלא תפלה.

יעקב תקן תפלת ערבית שנאמר ויפגע במקום וילן שם
ואין פגיעה אלא תפלה.

towards Charan]. “*Vayifgah*” Yaakov in the place and he slept there because the sun had set...” (Bereishit 28:10-11), and “*pegiyah*” (encounter) is a term specifically used for prayer.

What does it mean that the prayers were instituted by the Forefathers? Did we not already learn that prayer had originally been individualized and only later, in the days of the Great Assembly, had it been standardized?

2. **Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha), Chiddushei Aggadot to Berachot 26b – The Forefathers taught us that we need to pray three times a day.**

It must be that the Forefathers instituted the prayers for if not so, then the Sages would never have instituted any prayers corresponding to the sacrifices (like the Mussaf prayer) either. But this does not mean that the Forefathers instituted the order of the Eighteen Prayers, for that order was only instituted in Yavneh. Rather, from the Forefathers we learn that a person needs to pray three times a day, in fulfillment of the verse, “evening, morning, and afternoon I speak [and moan, and He hearkened to my voice.] (Tehillim/Psalms 55:18).

Also, it is obvious that Avraham also prayed the afternoon and evening services, for as we have learned (Yuma 28b), he kept (the entire Torah), even the mitzvah of Eruv Tavshillin. Rather, we learn from the Torah that each of the Forefathers prayed. Such has been written in Sefer Yuchsin.

איצטריך ליה למימר דאבות תקנום דאל"ה לא הוו תקנו תפלות כלל גם מוסף נגד קרבנות ולא שתקנו הם סדר י"ח ברכות דהא ביבנה נתקנה על הסדר אלא דמאבות למדנו שצריך לאדם להתפלל ג' תפלות בכל יום לקיים מה שנאמר ערב ובוקר וצהרים אשיחה [ואהמה וישמע קולי] (תהילים נה, יח).

ונראה עוד דודאי אברהם נמי היה מתפלל מנחה וערבית דאמרינן ביומא (כח:): דאפילו עירוב תבשילין קיים אלא דמכל אחד מהאבות למדנו לפי מה שמצינו בו שהתפלל וכ"כ בספר יוחסין.

(For more on the role of Biblical figures in constructing the Amidah see Rabbi Binyamin HaRofeh, Shiblei Haleket.)

The Talmud records another opinion about the origin of the three daily prayers.

3. **Talmud Bavli, to Berachot 26b – The times for reciting the Amidah follow the order of the Temple sacrifices.**

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The prayers were instituted corresponding to the daily sacrifices [brought in the Temple].

רבי יהושע בן לוי אמר: תפלות כנגד תמידין תקנום.

4. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Handbook of Jewish Thought, Volume II – There is a profound connection between prayer and sacrifice.**

Prayer is considered the service of God similar to the sacrifices of the Holy Temple. The Psalmist thus said, “Let my prayer be set forth as incense before You, the lifting of my hands as the evening sacrifice”

(Psalms 141:2). Just as a sacrifice unites the spiritual and material by making a lowly animal the object of serving God, so does prayer unite the spiritual and material by making the request of our material needs a service of God. It is for this reason that, when it is impossible to bring sacrifices, prayer can be offered in their stead, as the prophet exclaimed, “We will offer the words of our lips instead of calves” (Hosea 14:3).

Thus, formal prayers were ordained in place of the regular daily sacrifices performed in the Temple in Jerusalem – which themselves were accompanied by prayer and song. Moreover, the prayer of a sincere heart is better than any sacrifice, as the Psalmist exclaimed, “I will praise the name of God with a song, I will exalt Him with thanksgiving, and it shall please God more than the offering of an ox” (Psalms 69:31-32).

Praying at these three special times serves to focus our attention on God at crucial moments in the day.

5. **Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri, Beit HaBechirah, Berachot 6b- The three daily prayers correspond to the three phases of a day.**

A person must be careful with all his [three Amidah] prayers and not take it less seriously because he has already prayed previously in the day. The prayers were established three times a day because of the three changes in the day, in order to recognize and acknowledge that everything comes from Him.

יזהר בכל תפילות היום ואל יקל בעצמו על שכבר
התפלל קצתו, שהתפילות נתקנו ג' פעמים ביום על
שם השינוי שהיום משתנה ג' פעמים, להכיר ולהודות
שהכל מאיתו.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III.

- ⌘ The basic structure of the Amidah is divided into three parts: praises, requests, and expressing thanks. This structure resembles the humble approach of a servant entreating his master.
- ⌘ The requests included in the Amidah cover our most basic spiritual and physical needs, both on the individual and the communal levels.
- ⌘ Although we understand that God already knows our needs and desires, we pray to Him in an attempt to change ourselves by drawing closer to Him. Similarly, we pray for others so that God will relieve the unwarranted pain we feel at their suffering.
- ⌘ Praying three times a day is a tradition going back to our Forefathers. Additionally, the prayers parallel the sacrificial services in the Temple because, like sacrifices, prayer is a profound way of serving God.

SECTION IV. WHY STANDARDIZED PRAYER?

Having charted both the development of the Amidah and how it was structured, we now need to understand why our Sages saw fit to standardize the text and timeframe of prayer. If prayer is a connection to God, how can it be regulated? Wouldn't it be so much more meaningful to keep prayer times spontaneous and its wording freestyle?

Judaism certainly does not look down upon spontaneous prayer. Pouring out one's soul to God is a beautiful thing. But the Amidah is about more than just individual expression. It reaches beyond the specific emotions and desires of individuals and connects with a higher reality on a number of planes.

PART A. PROFOUND WORDS

The words of the Amidah cannot be matched.

1. **Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, *Nefesh HaChaim*, pp. 327-328 – The wording of the Amidah, composed by Prophets and Sages, is far more profound than what anyone today could recite. (See also *Ruach Chayim* 1:2.)**

Our Divine service today consists of prayer instead of sacrifices. Prayer stands at the most exalted place of the universe, and each letter rises to an exceedingly high place ... For this important purpose, 120 elders, among them several prophets, composed it. But people of our stature are also capable of forming requests for our needs and asking for healing of our ailments in an educated manner. So why did we need prophets to do this for us? However, they put particular intentions into the prayers and established them in such a manner that everything should be included in them, so that each Jewish person can pray according to his understanding.

The underlying reason [why the prophets needed to do this for us] is as follows: from the day the prayers were established, there have not been two similar prayers in the world that have had the identical effect Above and risen to the same level. For today's prayer is different from that of yesterday, and everything is dependent on these words [which were fixed for us for every prayer]. Therefore, prophecy was necessary for this.

And all of the intentions and secrets that have been revealed about the prayers until this day are not even like a drop from the vast sea in comparison to the intention that even the smallest in stature of the 120 elders understood.

עבודתנו היא רק התפלה, במקום זבח ומנחה, והדברים עומדים ברומו של עולם. וכל תבה ותבה עולה למקום גבוה מעל גבוה.... וכי לא לחנם ק"ך זקנים, ומהם כמה נביאים יסדוה. והלא גם מאנוש כערכנו לא יפלא, ליסד בקשת כל צרכנו, ורפואות תחלואנו, בלשון למודים, ולמה צריך לנביאים? אך המה כווננו בה, ותקנוה, על אופן, שתהיה הכל כלול בה. וכל איש ישראל, כל אחד מתפלל כפי הבנתו.

וכלל של דבר, שמיום שנתקנה, לא היה בעולם ב' תפלות שיעשו רושם שוה למעלה, ושיעלו למדרגה א', כי משונה בזה תפלת היום מתפלת אתמול כי יעבר, והכל תלוי בתבות אלו. ולכך הוצרך נבואה לזה.

וכל הכונות והסודות, שנתגלו על התפלה עד היום אינם כטפה מים הגדול, נגד הכונה שהשיג הקטן מק"כ זקנים. וגם הגדול לא השיג, רק כפי ערכו ושרש נשמתו. אבל באמת, היא גבוהה יותר מבינת כל אדם, והיא קושרת עולם התחתון בעליון, כמו הקרבן.

And even the greatest of them only reached an understanding according to his level and the root of his soul. In truth, prayer is much above any person's understanding, and it unites the lower world with the higher one in the same way as a sacrifice.

2. **Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, pg. xv – The text of the Amidah could only have been produced by prophets.**

From the authorship of the Shemoneh Esrei, we can draw an important conclusion about its significance. It is not a particularly long prayer – only eighteen blessings in its original formulation with a nineteenth added later, and only several hundred words altogether. Nor is its subject matter mysterious; it was couched in very lean and simple Hebrew so that its content could be mastered easily (as explained by the commentator Rabbeinu Bachya regarding Deuteronomy 11:13). Nevertheless it had to be composed by one of the most august bodies in history, the Members of the Great Assembly, that led Israel at the start of the Second Temple era and consisted of 120 great elders, among them many prophets. Surely Israel possessed large numbers of inspired poets and writers. Couldn't some of them have been commissioned to compose the necessary prayers? Did the entire leadership of the nation have to take the task upon itself?

Obviously it did. Every word and syllable has a thousand effects in ways we cannot imagine. Even the mystical interpretations of the Kabbalist, Arizal, who made known many of the Kabbalistic intentions that are contained within the text of the prayers, barely scratched the surface of the meanings intended by the Great Assembly. Every word of the Silent Prayer is essential, separately and in the context of the entire prayer. The text was so profound and its effects so metaphysical and extraordinary, that it could not be entrusted to poets, only to prophets.

3. **Rabbi Yechezkel Levinstein, *Ohr Yechezkel, Darchei Avodah* p. 97 – The prayers themselves provide a framework to enable a person to develop himself and reach new levels.**

The essence of prayer is to transform a person, elevating him to previously unrealized heights. Prayer is not merely the recitation of certain words, rather its goal is to change a person, and enable him to grow from one level to the next...

כי יסוד התפילה לשנות את האדם ולהביאו לידי
מחוזות ומקומות נוספים אשר לא היה בהם, ואין
התפילה אמירת פרקים וכדומה, אלא מטרתה להפוך
אותו ולשנותו ממדרגה למדרגה...

4. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner and Lisa Aiken, *The Art of Jewish Prayer*, pg. 10 – The prayers in the Amidah are of universal relevance for the Jewish people throughout history.**

When the Men of the Great Assembly redacted the prayers of the Amidah, they did so with prophetic knowledge and Divine wisdom. This granted them the ability to see what would happen to the Jewish people throughout history until the time when the Moshiach (Messiah) would come. This foreknowledge allowed them to compose the prayers that Jews would need to say in all future generations in order to maintain their vital connection with God, both individually and as a nation. They were able to discern, in ways that we frequently are not, what Jews in every generation would require in order to flourish emotionally, intellectually, materially and spiritually.

PART B. QUALITY TIME

Judaism doesn't just tell us what to pray, it tells us when to pray: three times a day. Doesn't this also take some of the spontaneity out of an experience that should otherwise stem from internal inspiration?

1. **Ibid., pp. 9-10 – We have set times to pray to God because in order to have a relationship with Him.**

Our Sages ordained that we are supposed to pray three times a day – in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. The reason is that we need to include God in our lives at different times throughout the day...

Another reason for having standardized times for daily prayer is that there are special times every day when God waits to hear our prayers. This is analogous to the way that one expects one's spouse to be home at a certain time every day, and to connect with him or her at that time. Imagine what would happen to a marriage if the husband and wife spoke to each other only a few times a year – about as often as many people feel motivated to pray with feeling!

But what if I just don't feel like praying? Should I still pray then, anyway?

2. **Ibid. – Prayer takes effort, not just inspiration.**

If we prayed only when we felt like it, there would be times when we would be far removed from prayer, and we would not make the necessary effort to recognize God's involvement in our lives.

The lack of motivation to pray should not be taken as a sign that we shouldn't bother with it. Rather, it should serve as a sign that we need to make greater effort to let the words of the prayers affect us as they can and should.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV.

- ⌘ While standardizing the language of prayer and fixing times to pray may seem to rob prayer of its spontaneity and inspiration, the gains far outweigh the losses.
- ⌘ The wording of the Amidah, composed by some of the greatest spiritual giants in Jewish history, cannot be duplicated by people simply adlibbing. The concerns it addresses are those of crucial importance to Jews, both as individuals and as a nation.
- ⌘ Praying at fixed times does not make it less sincere; just the opposite, it shows a sense of commitment to our relationship with God. Furthermore, having such a fixed time demands that we put effort into our praying and that we do not just sit back and wait for the inspiration to hit.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AMIDAH?

The Amidah is our chance to talk directly with God. It is an opportunity to focus on our relationship with Him, to pour out our needs and desires before Him in recognition that ultimately only He has the power to guarantee our success.

WHY AND WHEN WAS THE AMIDAH COMPOSED?

Originally people just prayed using whatever words came to them. But after the destruction of the first Temple and the assimilation that occurred due to the exile that followed, the Jewish leaders at the time saw a need to standardize the text of Jewish prayer.

Hundreds of years later, after the destruction of the Second Temple, some amendments were made to the text of the Amidah and a nineteenth blessing was added to it.

WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE AMIDAH?

The Amidah follows a three-part structure of praises to God, followed by requests for our individual and communal spiritual and physical needs, and then closes with thanks to God for listening to our prayers (and hopefully fulfilling our wishes).

WHY DO WE FOLLOW A SET TEXT AND HAVE FIXED TIMES FOR PRAYER? ISN'T IT BETTER TO PRAY SPONTANEOUSLY WHEN WE FEEL THE INSPIRATION TO DO SO?

While Judaism does not denigrate spontaneity, praying the Amidah is about more than mere individual expression. The words of the Amidah, composed as they were by prophets and Sages, reach beyond the limitations of the individual to affect the spiritual worlds. They are also less frivolous than the thoughts of the average person, addressing as they do the crucial needs of Jews throughout the generations. Additionally, having fixed times to pray shows commitment to developing a relationship with God, and forces us to put effort into that relationship rather than just waiting for inspiration.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING

Rabbi Doniel Berger, Discovering Prayer

Rabbi Mayer Birnbaum, Pathway to Prayer

Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer, Shemonah Esrei / Amidah

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Rinat Chaim / Shemonah Esrei

Rabbi Zev Leff, Shemonah Esrei

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