

# Prayer in the time of COVID

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The great advantage of having to pray alone during this period of lock down is that one can actually take the time to pay attention to the words being said and to focus on their meaning and relevance (rather than keeping up with the congregation).

According to Maimonides, prayer in its original, Biblical form was simply a private way of reaching out to God. The Hebrew word *Tefilla* means an expression of feeling. *Lehitpalel*, the verb, means to express oneself. It is a human response to God which can be said at any time in any language. Only much later, as Jews were exiled and alienated from their roots and language, did the leaders intervene and create a menu of ideas to assist individuals who could not find the words needed to express themselves.

After the destruction of the Temple, these ideas were formally edited to create the universal system of prayer we have today. It unites Jews wherever they are and whatever their colloquial languages, in a common liturgy. Today, it has more of a communal role than a personal one – even if there is a tradition of inserting one's own words and concerns at different stages.

There are of course different ways of looking at prayers; the history, the text, and the experience. The biggest problem many have with prayer is the language itself. Because the main prayers were composed in Hebrew, most people nowadays do not understand the words. All translations are subjective and reflect something of the character mind and context of the translator. As the old proverb goes, *Traduire, tradire est* – to translate is to betray. Most translation of the Hebrew liturgy is dated and sounds both stilted and irrelevant.

Every language has its own character and music, of course. One can easily differentiate the flowing sounds of Italian as opposed to the more guttural Northern European languages. Opera sounds more romantic in Italian (even for someone who does not understand Italian) than in English.

The language of Jewish meditation is Hebrew and only in Hebrew can one appreciate the poetry, and song of the words. Whoever wrote these ancient texts had a feeling for music, poetry, and cadence. They were not meant to be parsed or reduced to colloquial language but to create mood and sounds

very different to the normal ones we hear around us. They should take us into a spiritual world, as well as identification with a culture, a people and its history.

Another common criticism of traditional prayer is that it is often an exercise in mindless repetition. Rhythmic recitation of a Divine name, phrase or word is typical of all spiritual traditions that try to emphasize the wholistic connection between body, mind, and soul. Although Buddhist mantras are the most well-known example of rhythmic repetition, it has always been a feature of practical Kabbalah and the traditions that preceded it.

When we talk about prayer in Jewish Law, we are referring to the Amidah – the Eighteen (now nineteen) blessings (or, if you prefer, benedictions). *Amidah* means “stand up” because the text is recited standing and facing Jerusalem three times a day and four on holy days. The opening and the closing three blessings are virtually always the same. The middle blessings vary according to whether the day is mundane or sacred (like Shabbat or holidays). There are variations between the various Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions. But they are so minor as to make little practical difference.

They open with a formulaic *Baruch Ata HaShem*. This, alone, is a problem in English. It is translated most often as “Blessed are You God.” In my youth, “blessed” was a swear word. “You blessed nuisance – run away and play.”

The word *Baruch* has lots of different associations. In the Torah, *Baruch* is used to express love and a desire to see someone succeed and flourish. It implies care. It also has etymological connections to the Hebrew word for knee, *berech* (as in to bend one’s knee as a sign of submission). Or *bereycha* meaning a flowing pool of water. In addressing God this way, we say we care about this relationship and want to express our gratitude for it.

The first blessing addresses God with reverence and “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” You might notice that throughout the poetry of the Amidah, the three word or phrase combination keeps on repeating. Probably to make the connection between prayers and the three-day preparation for the Sinai revelation. But also for rhythmic effect.

The beauty of the prayer lies not just in the subject but also in the music of the words. Abraham (with a hard B), sounds much softer when it is read Avraham. And the Hebrew *El, Elohey, or El Elyon* sounds much more lyrical than

the English "God, God of."

I often wondered why the text didn't simply say "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." The repeating of El is an example of the rhythmic. Some have suggested it was an intentional way of implying that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each had a different relationship and idea of God which reflected their very different personalities and experiences. And so it with us today.

The text goes on to say that God is "great, powerful, awesome." It sounds very anthropomorphic and unnecessary. But in the rhythm, the reiteration is to express passion as opposed to flattery. And gratitude for all the good things in life. It is like saying "I love you, I love you, I love you". The paragraph takes us back in time, to the origins of our tradition and the characters who were our prime movers. It demonstrates where we came from and why we retain our own distinct traditions today.

The second paragraph talks about Reviving the Dead. The concept of Resurrection is an idea that has come to have a great deal of theological significance and much disagreement. In our Bible, it means no more than that God was, and is, capable of anything. Nowadays, we might talk about resurrecting the Jewish people through their return to Zion. But then it meant preserving us and bringing people lost to the world back to life. Picking us up when we fall or falter. Freeing us from sickness. Releasing us from prison. It is here that we thank God for the rains – for nature. Resurrection of a different kind, reviving the earth from its winter hibernation.

The last of the three opening blessings deals with holiness. The Hebrew word for holy is *Kadosh*. Its etymological meaning is to be set aside either in a good or profane way. To be different in raising one's game in spiritual and moral terms. How to live our lives effectively. Here, too, there is a rhythm. The word *Kadosh* is reiterated – another example of intentional repetition for poetic effect. These opening three blessings of the Amidah start with history, progress on to our physical needs, and culminate in the spiritual realm.

The ultimate aim of prayer is to create different states of mind and sensibility. It should be a break from the normal world of work, care, preoccupation, and pressure. Which is why prayer, when used properly, can be therapeutic even if one does not understand the words or like the translation.

Prayer at home, which we are now compelled to do, can be as important as prayer in the synagogue. It is true that it lacks the feeling of being part of a community. But communities can often be very distracting. An occasional break reminds us of the need for the personal as well as the communal. The mystical process of the sounds of prayer aside, with a little creative thinking, these ancient texts can be as relevant today as they ever were.

In the present situation, where we have to fall back on our own resources, there is much to be said in favor of private prayer and exploring its deeper meanings and function. Prayer is not just a matter of asking. It is a state of being.

I hope to add a piece on the middle and final blessings shortly.