

# More on Prayer

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We are living in a fraught, unpredictable world of conflicting values and policies. So I am returning to an earlier post about prayer. What an escape prayer can be. But that does not mean that if you choose to follow the traditional liturgy, there are no questions or tensions there, too. Public prayer, in traditional Jewish terms, is poetry and song designed to take our minds away from the present. But it requires our own input to make it more relevant.

The core prayer in Judaism is the *Amidah* which is said three times a day on weekdays (four on Shabbat and Festivals and five on *Yom Kipur*). The opening three blessings and the last three are always the same and last month, I analyzed the first three blessings.

The middle blessings of the weekday *Amidah* (which are always the same with very minor modifications for seasons and festivals ) cover a very wide range of human concerns which fall into two categories: the universal themes of personal need and the specifically national. It is these that I discuss here:

**Blessing 4** is in praise of intellect, there are three words used here – *Dea, Bina veHaskel*. They are generally understood as cognitive knowledge, intuition and assessment. In classical Hebrew, many words are used in different ways. *Dea* is used to mean knowing but also cohabitation. *Bina* can be intuition, sensitivity or emotion. We now use *Haskel* to mean common sense but in the Bible it means skill or even deception. They all refer to different ways of decision making.

When we say this prayer, we might hope for a clear mind before an exam. But these are all phrased in the third person. We speak them as the voice of the community, the nation, the world. Though we may want to treat them as personal too.

**Blessing 5** calls for return or reconciliation to the benefits and the constraints of Torah as our guide for correct and effective behavior. We all err and fail to some degree. But, instead of giving up or falling into depression, we have the capacity to reconcile through *Teshuva*, repentance but actually it simply means to change one's mind or direction. The Biblical words for doing wrong, literally mean "to miss the mark," "to go off the

track," "to fall short" or "to miss something." None of these carry the awesome burden and guilt of a word like "sin". One simply gets back on track.

**Blessing 6** asks God for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a quality we expect from those we love and who care about us. In asking God for forgiveness we are reminded that we too must forgive. Forgiveness unites humanity instead of breeding antagonism and alienation. It is the path to peace.

**Blessing 7** is the prayer in which we ask to be heard. To have our limitations or our suffering to be acknowledged. Many of us are constrained by personal, and social conditions. We are prevented from fulfilling our potential for reasons often beyond our control; genetic, social, prejudice or malice. So we pray to be heard and ask for *Geulah*.

The word *Geulah* is often translated as redemption. In Hebrew, it does not mean an automatic, supernatural theological process but rather an actual one of relief. It means to unblock eyes, ears, and mind. To roll back impediments. To free oneself.

**Blessing 8** is an appeal to God to heal us. There are different ways of healing: natural, magical, superstitious, experimental, and scientific. An appeal to God for healing does not mean that we should not accept or welcome human agencies. It neither rejects naturalist, holistic medicine or medical intervention. The ideal of course is a natural, Divine cure with no side effects.

**Blessing 9** acknowledges the unpredictability of nature and is also a prayer that we humans will not destroy the natural order but protect it. After all, the annual cycle of Nature provides sustenance through agriculture as well as the natural forces of sun, water and rain. We depend on rain and dew in their respective seasons.

**Blessing 10** begins a sequence of four blessings that are less about humans and more about societies. This is a prayer to bring people back together. Through force, families are split and communities destroyed. Our own history of forced exile is emblematic of its corrosive effects. A prayer to bring people back together might also be seen as one for the protection and consolidation of different communities, cultures and nations.

**Blessing 11** is about the importance of honest judges. Justice for Justice's

sake rather than the almost universal system of confrontational advocacy or oratory, subject to personal biases, pressure, bribery, entrapment, and corruption. Justice, *Mishpat*, goes hand in hand with *Tsedek* – that which is right, caring and generous.

**Blessing 12** is a blessing that was added long after the others. It condemns those arrogant ones who betrayed, made fun of Judaism and tried to undermine it. It stems from a time when Judaism was being attacked ideologically from without as well as from within.

**Blessing 13** is a prayer for the world for the good, and genuinely pious amongst us- and, significantly this includes and elevates converts. In addition, it emphasizes the need for our sages, scribes, scholars and teachers. They are valued and supported for the contributions they make to keeping our society and traditions alive.

**Blessing 14** is a prayer for Jerusalem. Jerusalem has always been the symbol of a central sanctuary for Judaism. But is also a vision of an ideal. A vision of a perfect society – a city on a hill – where all nations come together in spiritual unity.

But what does the “Throne of David” mean? I do not believe that monarchy is the perfect form of government. The record of Biblical and post Biblical kings was rarely impressive. Even if there were some great and spiritual exceptions. When we talk about David here, I think we mean him to represent a leader, however imperfect, who combined political power with wisdom and spirituality. Not a messianic figure but more of an ideal we look back on with historical nostalgia.

**Blessing 15** is a prayer for salvation. The Jews of Babylon and, later, Greece and Rome, looked to the reinstatement of the Davidic dynasty. They hoped for “salvation”, *Yeshuah*, to re-establish independence. The theological concept of a Messiah, even if it is not explicitly mentioned here is the goal for humanity to come together to work for a fairer, more peaceful world where, as the Talmud says, “ there will be no political oppression or domination.”

The last of these blessings, **Blessing 16**, asks God to hear our prayers. It is an expression of hope and love rather than a petition for specific benefits. We believe that humans can intercede with the Almighty and hope that what God wants and what they want will coincide. This is the point at which, by tradition, we can insert our own requests.

Prayer in its true form is an expression of our desires and concerns. Reward and punishment, as Maimonides says, is not of this physical world. The world runs according to the way it was created and we have to live under those conditions. We can want, desire, cry, appeal and strive for the best outcome but, in the end, we must accept what happens. After all, we are taught "to bless God for the bad as well as the good."

I have to admit that I rarely say each one of these prayers with the same degree of intensity and concentration. I tend to drift in and out of consciousness, focusing on specific prayers according to my mood. Similarly, I find new meanings and significances in familiar words and phrases no matter how often I have repeated them.

Praying is a challenge. Sometimes a discipline. But rewarding on many levels. It is an opportunity for thought, meditation and elevation. If nothing else, it takes us out of our mundane routines and for a few moments at different times of the day, to breathe and to dream.