

Welcome to 10 Minute Topics

This week's topic is: Jewish Prayer

Prayer is an ancient way of connecting with G-d and bringing G-d into our lives on a daily basis. It was prophesied that prayer would one day take the place of the sacrifices since the Jews would be without the Temple. It is important to have *kavanah* - the proper mindset for prayer each time we pray. It is important to remind oneself that one is speaking to G-d with the intention to fulfill the mitzvah of prayer whenever one prays. Some people use liturgical melodies (*nigunim*) to help them come to a place of *kavanah*. It is important to free one's mind from distractions and concentrate on speaking to G-d.

Hebrew is the language of Jewish prayer. It is permissible to pray in one's language but it is best to pray in Hebrew. Jewish prayer is overwhelmingly a communal act. It is permissible (and even encouraged) to pray on an individual basis but communal prayer is ideal (in fact, there are some prayers that cannot be said without a *minyan* [a quorum of ten Jews]). Observant Jews pray (*daven*) three times daily, every day: the *Shacharit* (morning) service, the *Minchah* (afternoon prayer) service and the *Maariv* (evening) service. It is believed that Abraham began the *Shacharit* service, Isaac began the *Minchah* service, and Jacob began the *Maariv* service. Additional Biblical references suggest that King David and the prophet Daniel prayed three times a day. In Psalms, David states: "Evening, morning and afternoon do I pray and cry, and He will hear my voice" (55:18). As in Daniel: "[...] his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he had done before" (6:11).¹ In addition to the prayers during these services there are specific prayers added during various Jewish holidays, synagogue services, Shabbat, and lifecycle events.

Orthodox Judaism regards *halacha* (Jewish law) as requiring Jewish men to pray three times daily and four times daily on the Sabbath and most Jewish holidays, and five times on Yom Kippur. Orthodox Jewish women are required to pray at least daily, with no specific time requirement, but the system of multiple daily prayer services is regarded as optional. Conservative Judaism also regards the *halachic* system of multiple daily services as mandatory. Since 2002, Conservative Jewish women have been regarded as having undertaken a communal obligation to pray the same prayers at the same times as men, with traditionalist communities and individual women permitted to opt out. Reform and Reconstructionist congregations do not regard *halacha* as binding and hence regard appropriate prayer times as matters of personal spiritual decision rather than a matter of religious requirement.¹

According to *halacha*, all individual prayers and virtually all communal prayers may be said in any language that the person praying understands. Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 1:4) relates that until the Babylonian exile, all Jews composed their own prayers. After the exile, however, the sages of the time (united in the Great Assembly) found the ability of the people insufficient to continue the practice.¹

These prayers are collected in a prayer book known as a *siddur* (from the Hebrew root *seder* – meaning order). The oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism, the *Shema*, consists of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. From ancient times, the commandment to

speak of these matters "when you retire and when you arise" has been fulfilled by reciting the Shema twice a day: morning and night. The Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24-26) is also another early fixed daily prayer. A set of eighteen (currently nineteen) blessings called the *Shemoneh Esreh* or the *Amidah* (Hebrew, "standing [prayer]"), is traditionally ascribed to the Great Assembly in the time of Ezra, at the end of the Biblical period.¹ This prayer is the cornerstone of every Jewish service.

According to the Talmud, soon after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem a formal version of the Amidah was adopted at a rabbinical council in Yavna, under the leadership of Rabban Gamaliel II and his colleagues. However, the precise wording was still left open. The order, general ideas, opening and closing lines were fixed. Most of the wording was left to the individual reader. It was not until several centuries later that the prayers began to be formally fixed. By the Middle Ages the texts of the prayers were nearly fixed, and in the form in which they are still used today.¹

The siddur was printed by Soncino in Italy as early as 1486, though a siddur was first mass-distributed only in 1865. The siddur began appearing in the vernacular as early as 1538. The first - unauthorized - English translation, by Gamaliel ben Pedahzur (a pseudonym), appeared in London in 1738; a different translation was released in the United States in 1837.¹

Readings from the Torah (five books of Moses) and the Nevi'im ("Prophets") form part of the prayer services. To this framework various Jewish sages added, from time to time, various prayers, and, for festivals especially, numerous hymns.¹

The earliest existing codification of the prayerbook was drawn up by Rav Amram Gaon of Sura, Babylon, about 850 CE. Half a century later Rav Saadia Gaon, also of Sura, composed a siddur, in Arabic. These were the basis of Simcha ben Samuel's Machzor Vitry (11th century France), which was based on the ideas of his teacher, Rashi. Another formulation of the prayers was that appended by Maimonides to the laws of prayer in his Mishneh Torah: this forms the basis of the Yemenite liturgy, and has had some influence on other rites. From this point forward all Jewish prayerbooks had the same basic order and contents.¹

During the 6th century BCE, during the Babylonian Exile, the Jewish people had no Temple in which to offer sacrifices. Prayers were used as a substitute for these sacrifices. Therefore, the prayers were said three times a day according to the thrice-daily sacrifice times at the Temple. Additional prayers were added for Shabbat and some holidays in accordance with the additional sacrifices at the Temple on Shabbat and some holidays.

The *Shacharit* (from *shachar*, morning light) prayer is recited in the morning. *Halacha* limits parts of its recitation to the first three (Shema) or four (Amidah) hours of the day, where "hours" are 1/12 of daylight time, making these times dependent on the season. *Mincha* (derived from the flour offering that accompanied each sacrifice) may be recited from half an hour after *halachic* noontime. This earliest time is referred to as *mincha gedola* (the "large mincha"). It is, however, preferably recited after *mincha ketana* (2.5 *halachic* hours before nightfall). Ideally, one should complete the prayers before sunset, although many authorities permit reciting Mincha until nightfall. In many congregations, the afternoon and evening prayers are recited back-to-back on

a working day, to save people having to attend synagogue twice. The Vilna Gaon discouraged this practice, and followers of his set of customs commonly wait until after nightfall to recite *Ma'ariv* (the name derives from the word "nightfall").¹

¹ Wikipedia: Jewish Services

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_services#Origin_and_History_of_Jewish_Prayer)

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